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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

ENACTING TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE: INSIGHTS FROM THE "UNDERSTORY OF MOVEMENTS"

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

PSYCHOLOGY

with an emphasis in LATIN AMERICAN & LATINO STUDIES

by

Daniel Rodriguez Ramirez, M.Ed.

September 2024

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Peter Biehl
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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2024

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures……………………..……………………………………….…………..…..iv

Abstract……………………………………………………………………………...…...v

Dedication/Acknowledgments……………………………………..…..................vii

Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review …………………………..…………..1

Chapter 2: Methodology……..………..……………………………………………..33

Chapter 3: The Tree Understory of Social Change …..……………………..…....…55

Chapter 4: Tree Roots Internal Organizational Transformative Change Practices…..67

Chapter 5: External Community-based Transformative Change Actions…....…....103

Chapter 6: Conclusions, Limitations, and Implications…….……..…………..…123

Appendices………………..………………………………………..……………142

Bibliography……………………..……………………………………………....157

List of Figures

Figure 1: Results' Visualization: The Tree Understory of Social Change…..………57

Figure 2: Care Coalition Modified Consensus-based Model…………..…………..112

Abstract

Enacting Transformative Change: Insights From The "Understory of Movements"

Daniel Rodriguez Ramirez, M.Ed.

This dissertation examines how organizers and care workers enact change to promote socially just futures (Tuck, 2009). By studying the praxis of transformative change, which aims to address the root causes of social issues (Kivell et al., 2022), we aim to promote knowledge from the grassroots by gathering insights into how change-makers function as a group and enact transformative change in their communities.

A praxis (i.e., embodied theory) of transformative change sheds light on grassroots processes that enact the social change many practitioners envision, starting within organizing settings. Learning from organizers' change praxis offers insights into how people envision futures of ideal co-existence, co-create internal practices to reorganize their settings, and engage in external collective actions (Basso & Krpan, 2022; Kivell et al., 2022; Martín-Baró, 1994). This aim aligns with the goals of critical and decolonial movements in scholar-activist psychology, effectively bringing community knowledge into academia. Specifically, I asked: How do care workers, organizers, and (scholar) activists embody and enact transformative change?

To explore this topic, I interviewed 25 care workers and organizers engaged in anti-racist and transformative organizing work. Guided by an information power sampling

strategy, we selected 17 interviews most relevant to our study's aims. Significantly, we noted that many of our participants identified their work as abolitionist, aiming to dismantle systems and ideologies of harm by advocating for redirecting funding, resources, and programming from logics of punishment rooted in carceral systems (i.e., police, prisons, justice system) to structures of care, mutual aid, and community support, We then conducted a critical reflexive thematic analysis with a student-activist research team (Braun & Clarke, 2022). We analyzed insights from change-makers' expertise on how they: (1) envisioned ideal co-existence in society, (2) enacted those visions to co-create internal practices to ensure equity and unsettle power differentials in their organizing settings, and (3) engaged in collective action to promote justice and liberation in their communities.

Our research team discerned results highlighting transformative change internal organizational practices that shaped external community actions: (a) Participants were inspired by their collectives' rebellious values of care, which shaped (b) the embodiment of care-centered values through relational practices, (c) democratizing decision-making processes aiming for heterarchy, and (d) instilling accountability mechanisms as a refusal to the systemic abandonment of people. This study contributes to understanding and promoting the psychology of social change, by learning directly from grassroots change-makers. Our research highlighted insights from the understory of the social change forest, illuminating clearings toward more just conditions of co-existence.

Dedication

To my family, for teaching me to do my best to contribute to the world with persistence, care, and compassion: Mamá Meri, Milu, Mamá Marcela, Padre, Amaru, Ivan, Ale, Fa, Alonso, Tío Alberto, Ana, Kathy, Fiore, Alvaro.

To my sister Milu, I hope I can be as kind, strong, and committed to doing the best for my community and myself as you always did. Giving me and Amarito the gift to see your resilience first-hand inspired me in a path to social justice research and teaching. You are and will always be my light.

To my parents and siblings, Amarito and Iván. Mamá Marcela and Padre, I appreciated so much growing up with lunch stories of how you helped others, you both seemed so proud when running into former students or patients who were now thriving and thankful for your efforts. You were both union people who led labor actions and stood up for your co-workers. You all instilled in me a deep commitment and respect for ethical service to people.

To my grandmother Mama Meri: Your stories of being a working single mother in the 1940s inspired me to keep going forward, no matter what. You raised me with strong values of caring for others. Education was so important to you, even though your life circumstances did not allow you to pursue it. I first heard from Maria Trinidad from you, and you and she were often in my mind while pursuing my doctorate.

To Maria Trinidad Enriquez, my great grandaunt and the first woman to fight her way into university and law school in Peru and South America:

Maria Trinidad founded the first school for working-class girls in 1870s Cusco, and later on the first night school for laborers, all before the age of 23. Recognizing the importance of education in asserting people's rights, she helped organize the first artisan union guild in Cusco - its president Francisco Gonzáles became the first Quechua laborer elected to the Peruvian Parliament. Determined to pursue higher education to continue serving people at Cusco, Maria Trinidad navigated systemic patriarchal hurdles to be admitted to university. Her well-documented struggle to access higher education led the government, with congressman Gonzáles assistance, to resolve women could indeed pursue university studies (Glave, 1997; Heredia, 2022). Yet, after excelling in finishing her studies, Maria Trinidad was not allowed to practice law. Committed to "fulfilling the important duty of seeking literary progress for all social classes" and determined to "open professional careers for people of my sex," she persisted lobbying for educational equity (Enriquez, as cited by García, 2022). Eventually, the president granted Maria Trinidad the individual right to use her degree to practice law, which she refused, insisting that this right be extended to all Peruvian women.

Maria Trinidad became a journalist, a teacher, and a seasoned women's rights activist, continually pressing the government to allow her to use her degree for good. Maria Trinidad educated my great grandfather, instilling a great respect for education and fighting oppression in my family. Her principled struggle resonated deeply with me, as I reflect on the challenges and potentials of doing social justice work during my Ph.D. program. Because of Maria Trinidad (Villanueva Urteaga, 1970), Mamá

Meri, and my father's family, I know of my Quechua and Inca roots, and stand on their shoulders and those of their Inca ancestors in pursuing work toward social change and collective liberation.

Lastly and most importantly, to the change-makers who inspired my learning through their insights. I feel humbled by your generosity sharing your knowledge and inspired to continue my work with discernment and care.

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I appreciate my mentor and committee member, Becca Covarrubias. Your teaching philosophy shaped my own, showing me that even though our work is serious, we can still find joy in it.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

Organizers and care workers are remaking their worlds through practice and action. Researchers and change-makers can learn from their transformative praxis to inspire people's social actions. This dissertation research aims to promote "the not yet…a present that is enriched by both the past and the future" (Tuck, 2009, p. 417). To promote how more just futures are co-created, this study uplifts knowledge from organizers and care workers' praxis of transformative change, which is defined as change that aims to address the root causes of social issues (Kivell et al., 2023; Riemer et al., 2020). One of the goals of psychological research drawing attention to transformative ways of knowing is "to remain grounded and connected…in the face of the unspeakable," stressing that the praxis people have within organizing spaces and the interpersonal relationships that sustain movements rely "not only on our words or frameworks but on the truth of our bodies" (Atallah & Dutta, 2023, p. 80). This dissertation honors change-makers embodied truths by gathering their insights through individual interviews on how their groups operate to enact change, with the goal of conducting research to be in solidarity and "theorize through struggle…alongside radical social movements" (Abi-Ghannam et al., 2023, p. 10). Some organizers share liberatory visions to co-create new systems that benefit all members (i.e., liberation; Martín-Baró, 1994; Serrano-García & Sánchez, 1990) beyond systemic hurdles that impair people's well-being. This study aims to explore how organizers and care workers' enact liberatory visions through their social change practices and actions.

To enact change, community psychology researchers and practitioners have used the concept of the theory of change as a way to understand how interventions promote specific outcomes (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Janzen et al., 2016). A transformative theory of change aims to address the root of social issues (Kivell et al., 2023; Riemer et al., 2020). Yet, theories of change are aspirational. A praxis (i.e., embodied theory) of transformative change might enlighten scholar's learning and teaching about particular grassroots processes to enact the change organizers and care workers would like to see in society, starting within their organizing settings. From our study, we discerned that a key approach to transformative change is abolition. Contemporary abolitionist organizing and care work stand on the shoulders of the 19th century slavery abolition movement, recognizing that slavery has evolved into carceral systems of criminalization, police repression, and imprisonment (Alexander, 2020). Rather than upholding these oppressive structures rooted in white supremacist violence, care workers and organizers advocate for their abolition, emphasizing instead community autonomy, meeting basic needs such as safety and housing, and centering care over punishment in systems of governance (Davis et al., 2022). Learning from change-makers' actual praxis of change can offer insights into how people share power to envision a future free from systems of harm and engage in collective actions (Basso & Krpan, 2022). This approach embodies a vision in people's collective ability to foster justice and social transformation, affirming that we can actively shape a world beyond systemic harm and oppression, rather than acquiescing to the idea that harm is an inevitable part of organizing human societies.

The above is a well-aligned goal of critical, abolitionist, and decolonial movements in scholar-activist psychology because it brings community knowledge into the academy in ways that are both desire and growth-oriented, uplifting efforts that guide us toward more equitable conditions of co-existence (Basso & Krpan, 2022; DaViera et al., 2024; Rodriguez Ramirez & Langhout, 2023; Tuck, 2009). Specifically, we[1] ask: How are care workers and organizers embodying and enacting transformative change within their organizing settings and beyond?

To offer a brief roadmap, we begin this chapter with an overview of abolition as the theoretical framework of this study and the systemic problem it aims to address, carcerality. Next, we outline how psychology research can embrace an abolitionist theory of change to study the psychology of social change, or the visions, practices, and actions that promote societal change. We will then introduce how a Social Psychology of Liberation approach seeks to unsettle power inequities through research, as Liberation Psychology aims to promote research that addresses and transforms inequities and oppression, thus transformative change and liberation are deeply intertwined. Following this, we will discuss the existent research on transformative change processes and actions. Finally, we conclude by sharing the significance of the present study.

[1] Even though I, Daniel Rodriguez Ramirez, wrote this dissertation, this research study was a collaboration involving my advisor, collaborator, research team, the participants, my committee, my colleagues, and all those who supported my journey. I write as "we" in appreciation of the collective effort that made this project possible.

Theoretical Framework: Abolition

> "We are constantly impacting and changing our civilization…And we are working to transform a world that is, by its very nature, in a constant state of change...How can we, future ancestors, align ourselves with the most resilient practices of emergence as a species? [...] We embody. We learn. We release the idea of failure because it's all data. But first we imagine. We are in an imagination battle...What are the ideas that will liberate all of us?" (brown, 2017, pp. 12, 14)

Human civilizations are in a constant state of change, embracing this axiom implies learning from the embodiment of social change ideas to reimagine and walk toward liberated worlds in the making. Abolition is one framework that shapes many transformative change practitioners' liberatory praxis or the embodiment of the liberated worlds many people desire (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020; Gilmore, 2022; Hayes & Kaba, 2023). Abolitionist work is defined by the pursuit of a demilitarized world, redirecting funding and resources from carceral systems - such as police, prisons, and other corporations that profiteer from surveillance, repression, and imprisonment - to reinvesting in community safety and self-governance, fostering more equitable access to care such as healthcare, quality education, and safe housing (Davis et al., 2022).

Abolition is a vision, and for it to be actualized, abolition must be embodied, grounding visions into practices and actions (Gilmore, 2022; Hayes & Kaba, 2023). The embodiment of abolition carries creative and dismantling goals, often through organizing. Systems of oppression such as neoliberal capitalism ideologically

manufacture consent by coercion, by offering working poor people minimum wage labor and work exploitation to barely survive. Carceral systems reinforce this coercion by providing the criminalization of poverty, punishing those, particularly from minoritized backgrounds, who resist becoming compliant, exploited workers within the neoliberal system that facilitates financial oppression (Adams et al., 2019). People's lack of access to a living wage and the resulting risk of homelessness, which can in turn lead to police harassment and imprisonment on criminal charges (Fine & Cross, 2021; Hauber, 2023). Abolition aims to dismantle carceral systems of harm and to co-create liberatory practices as alternatives. To understand abolition and its practices of change, we must first unpack carcerality.

The Root of the Problem: Carcerality

The punishment industry, or the prison industrial complex (i.e., PIC), sustains carcerality as a system. The PIC is supported by privately and publicly funded corporations and technologies of organized abandonment, criminalization, and systemic punishment (Gilmore, 2022). Carceral systems are maintained by the systemic abandonment of minoritized people through barriers to meeting their needs thereby creating socio-economic conditions where desperate people may resort to crime as a symptom a systemic ailment (De Nadai et al., 2020). Crime as an institutionalized ailment is then individualized through punitive measures such as prosecution, sentencing, and imprisonment (Alexander, 2020; Gilmore, 2022; Haney, 2020a).

Carcerality, as a for-profit system, is intimately connected to Neoliberalism. Neoliberalism comprises financial structures and ideologies promoting deregulation of laws protecting workers and consumers, as well as the privatization of services and carceral mechanisms of control, such as prisons (Hartnett, 2008). In other words, neoliberalism promotes policies that center corporate profit over the social welfare of people. Neoliberalism prioritizes the self as the ultimate locus of change and transformation, valuing hyperindividualism (Adams et al., 2019). Neoliberal ideologies sustain the PIC both structurally and ideologically (Hartnett, 2008). Structurally, the privatization of prisons has incentivized companies profiting from punishment to lobby and fund politicians to pass criminalizing laws, ensuring a pipeline to prison for racialized, working-class, and other minoritized communities. Ideologically, people's potential is viewed as dependent on being potential profit-makers, either by contributing to the marketplace through economic exploitation or by being criminalized and imprisoned, thus feeding the PIC for-profit system. By framing people's potential as individuals reliant on their marketplace contribution or exploitation through imprisonment, neoliberal ideologies sustain systems of carcerality.

Dominant narratives frame behavior deemed criminal as an individual issue, under neoliberal and white supremacist tropes of personal responsibility (Haney, 2008). Hence, the criminalizing dominant narrative understands criminal behavior not as a systemic symptom of oppressive socio-economic conditions and contextual factors but as an individual ailment of badness in certain people, often targeting

working poor, Black and Brown, or immigrant people (Alexander, 2020; Edelman, 2019; Menjívar, 2016). As of 2017, the criminalization of minoritized people in the form of imprisonment burdens US taxpayers with more than $180 billion dollars (Hirschberger, 2020). Every dollar spent in corrections or incarceration causes an additional ten dollars in social costs to the families and cost communities of those incarcerated, by loss of wages to address family members' basic needs (McLaughlin et al., 2016). Such costs bear witness to the enormous harmful impact of carcerality on society. Yet, no monetary analysis can capture the emotional and psychological toll of organized abandonment and carceral violence on people. Addressing these deeply entrenched systemic abandonment and structural harm requires more than just reforming systems - it calls for a fundamental transformation of systems and reimagining psychology's role in studying and advocating for transformative change.

Abolition and Psychology

There is a call for psychology to embrace abolition as a theory of change and as a praxis (DaViera et al., 2024; Gampa & Sawyer, 2023; Klukoff et al., 2021). This call is rooted in that intervention such as implicit bias training and procedural justice reforms often do not address the contextual, structural, and socio-historical basis of carcerality and systemic racism (Gilmore, 2022; Haney, 2020a). Social psychologists' efforts to work alongside police departments on implicit bias trainings have been varied and inconclusive (Worden et al., 2020). An analysis of NYPD's implicit bias training studied its effectiveness in reducing racial disparities in police enforcement such as stops, searches, use of force, and arrests (Worden et al., 2020). Despite

seemingly increased awareness among officers on implicit racial bias, there was weak evidence supporting a reduction on actual law enforcement racial disparities. Thus, even though anti-bias training might improve knowledge in some officers, it does not substantially shift police enforcement behavioral patterns shaped by internalized ideologies of systemic racism. For instance, misalignments between police enforcement behaviors and respecting racialized people's rights can hinder community safety and perpetuate distrust, particularly on Black communities (Najdowski & Goff, 2022). To address the problem of racism and carcerality at its root, psychologists are being called to study abolitionist frameworks, given its transformative potential in dismantling oppressive systems and co-creating new structures and practices that promote equity and liberation (DaViera et al., 2024; Gampa & Sawyer, 2023; Klukoff et al., 2021).

Social-Community psychology has the potential to contribute to abolitionist praxis - or the embodiment of a world free of carceral logics of punishment and systems of harm - by integrating contextual and socio-historical analyses of the reasons behind criminal behavior (Haney, 2020a). Indeed, psychology research has produced evidence on the infectivity of the PIC to promote community safety and prevent crime, while acknowledging that police surveillance and heightened criminalization may increase psychological distress (Baradaran Baughman, 2020; DaViera et al., 2024; Sewell et al., 2016; Weaver, 2018). Carceral and colonial approaches often favor individual-focused interventions to address systemic heightened criminalization, such as anti-bias training for police officers, which align

with neoliberal ideologies and fail to fully tackle social problems (Adams et al., 2019; Haney, 2020a). By adopting an abolitionist framework in the psychological study of social change, our field can move toward understanding the root of systemic oppression - in this case, carcerality - while learning from activists and organizers from abolition-aligned social movements such as Black Lives Matter (Gampa & Sawyer, 2023). Such a reorientation could facilitate psychological research to achieve its most liberatory and transformative potential.

Transitioning to an abolitionist framework within psychology might involve learning from abolitionist organizing efforts to foster transformative change and promote community well-being. Such a shift would require moving away from reformist reforms (i.e. reforms that maintain the status quo and fail to address the root issues, effectively the ‘changing same’; Gilmore, 2022) that aim to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of carceral systems, such as through anti-bias trainings, without questioning their fundamental roles in justifying systemic violence and indirectly promoting criminalization in society (DaViera et al., 2024; Worden et al., 2020). Rather, psychologists can study and advocate for grassroots non-reformist reforms many abolitionist organizers call for, such as the CAHOOTS programs (i.e., Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets), which aim to address mental health issues in the community without resorting to police enforcement (DaViera et al., 2024; Klukoff et al., 2021). By centering the expertise of change-makers actualizing liberatory praxis - or the embodiment of liberated worlds free of oppression - psychology can join efforts to address the systemic underpinnings of harm and

promote transformative change at the community level (Gampa & Sawyer, 2023; Najdowski & Goff, 2022).

This dissertation highlights care workers and organizers’ knowledge from community-facing organizations, working toward transformative change to unsettle carceral ideological boundaries that prevent us learning from liberated systems in the making (Tuck, 2009). Psychological research can highlight how people liberate themselves from harmful systems and ideologies by creating new organizational processes that assert everyone's humanity. Liberation is needed to dismantle and replace fixed hierarchies that sustain systems of oppression impairing minoritized people's psychological well-being. Learning from change makers' knowledge in creating new systems that replace the old might bring insights into concrete alternatives to reorganize our societies. Knowledge is a psychological resource that must be distributed equitably to promote a fairer world, a goal well-aligned with psychology "whose primary purposes are to understand and benefit people" (Pillay, 2017, p. 135). An abolitionist project through psychology scholarship entails promoting a redistribution of resources in society, from punitive systems to care-centered alternatives, aiming to uplift people's efforts to liberate their worlds (Martín-Baró, 1994).

Psychology of Liberation and Decolonizing Power

Social psychology of liberation scholars highlight the praxis of minoritized people collectively working toward liberation (Martín-Baró, 1994; Serrano-García & Sánchez, 1990). Indeed, amplifying people's virtues beyond their suffering and

contesting fatalism was one of the original goals of liberation psychology (Martín-Baró, 1994). Liberation is "a process entailing a social rupture in the sense of transforming both the conditions of inequality and oppression and the institutions and practices producing them" (Montero & Sonn, 2009, p. 1). Transformative change is hence at the center of liberation psychology. A Liberation Psychology approach highlights the epistemic disadvantages of people surviving oppression in telling their stories and tries to address such barriers by amplifying their stories of resistance and contestation, co-creating new worlds and ways to organize themselves past systems of harm.

To uplift such liberatory knowledge from the grassroots, there is a need to de-ideologize psychological research to transgress ideological boundaries of what is possible, amplifying collective action efforts to actualize the psychological well-being of minoritized people (Phillips et al., 2015). Within this context, de-ideologization might involve actively challenging and trespassing the ideological borders that are often imposed by the internalization of the status quo (Martín-Baró, 1990), questioning the acceptance of an oppressive world as a ‘normal’ or ‘acceptable’ way of existing (i.e., system justification; Hafer & Choma, 2009). This approach allows us to learn from the perspectives and experiences of change-makers as they dream and work toward co-creating fairer worlds. Indeed, de-ideologization can promote liberatory change in society, acknowledging that change is relational and may begin unraveling the ideological boundaries of what is possible (Montero, 2007; Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018). For example, a de-ideologization approach might recognize that

racial inequities in sentencing are shaped by white supremacy ideology embedded in police enforcement, prosecution, and sentencing practices - primarily within carceral systems (Alexander, 2020; Gilmore, 2022). Thus, the de-ideologizing mission of liberation psychology implicates unsettling western approaches to enact power.

Liberation implicates power since it aims to unsettle how current systems in power operate to reproduce oppression. Power is often defined by Eurocentric scholars as domination over others. For instance, Weber conceptualizes power as how "one actor…will carry out his (sic) own will despite resistance" (Weber, 1978, p.53), leaving consent out of his definition. There are efforts that purportedly aim to reconstruct power to serve the people, such as liberal versions of representative democracy or state communist approaches to socialism. Yet, such efforts often fall short by accumulating power amongst a privileged few who claim to represent disenfranchised populations (Dussel, 2008). Often, corrupt institutions, such as unregulated corporate lobbies shaping 'democratic' elections or unelected communist central committees, exert power over people as a form of domination. Definitions of power focused on domination are thus hegemonic in Euro-American political thought and action.

To seek liberation, change-makers can reconceptualize power to challenge domination-centered approaches to power that exert authoritarian will over others, unsettling the boundaries of social action. This corrupted version of power, rooted in domination, shapes the current exercise of power through institutions and systems that primarily serve corporate profit interests and the managerial class (Dussel, 2008;

Weber, 1978). Such institutions and systems institutionalize people to exert positional power under the guise of representing the will of people and workers, effectively undermining the political agency of the most minoritized people within communities and work spaces. Although Weber and other western thinkers focus on institutions that exert power through domination and sometimes violent enforcement, such as through carceral systems, Dussel and other critical theorists highlight the need for institutions and systems to reflect societal will, as power should derive from the continuous and direct consent of the people. Thus power can be redefined as a service toward the community, achieved through gaining direct consent at the grassroots level (Dussel, 2008; Marcos, 2003). Power, therefore, belongs to the people since power should be relational and obediential to the people. A way to ensure power is equitably distributed among people is for those with positional privilege and unfair access to power to depower themselves. Depowerment is defined as redistributing access to power and resources from people with positional privilege to people surviving oppression, and it can be actualized individually or structurally (Huygens, 1997; Prilleltensky, 2008; Riemer et al., 2020). Individuals can depower by decentering themselves from power roles, facilitating minoritized people access to bargaining powers to influence decisions affecting their lives. Structurally, policies can aim for depowerment by ensuring fairer access to resources to meet needs, which can facilitate the disruption of power hoarding to equitably redistribute power amongst people.

Learning from care workers and organizers seeking liberation in their organizing settings and beyond might offer practical ways to study how power can be shared through gaining consensus of the people. By reconceptualizing power as fundamentally intended to serve and benefit communities, practitioners might co-construct settings where community members lead transformative change efforts, embracing their role as agents of change. How people enact change in their communities is at the heart of this dissertation. We highlight people's virtues and efforts to create more just worlds where everyone has continuous chances to thrive. Perhaps change-makers envision "imagining [a] better society" to inspire their transformative change praxis (Baadan et al., 2020, p. 2).

Our Research Topic: Transformative Change

Transformative change, a focus of community psychology research and action, pertains to change that addresses the root causes of social issues, aiming to replace systems and structures of systemic oppression with ones of liberation (Kivell et al., 2023; Riemer et al., 2020). Transformative change is often juxtaposed with ameliorative change, a complementary approach that addresses the consequences of social issues, especially impacting people's psychological well-being (Riemer et al., 2020). For example, an ameliorative change intervention would strengthen minoritized students' armor to navigate the white supremacy-induced hidden curriculum in universities (Laiduc & Covarrubias, 2022). A transformative change intervention would aim to replace the hidden curriculum's policies and expectations (Wimpenny et al., 2022), perhaps ensuring systems that reshape power relations,

facilitating students having a say in shaping what policies serve them more effectively. Indeed, transformative change aims to "change…the rules of the game" (Rappaport, 1977, p. 127). Yet, interventions often use transformative and ameliorative change approaches as part of a continuum (Kivell et al., 2023; Prilleltensky, 2014). This dissertation focuses on the transformative change side of the continuum while acknowledging that care workers' efforts might move on both sides of the continuum concerning their context and goals.

Abolition and reform work resemble the transformative and ameliorative continuum. Abolitionist work tends to aim for dismantling and transforming structures and systems of harm, toward co-creating life-affirming systems and logics that assert people's humanity and well-being (Hayes & Kaba, 2022). Reform work tends to aim to decrease the harm of current systems of punishment and promote avenues for some people's needs to be met through the use of current systems (e.g., food distribution). Reform non-reform work rests in the abolitionist and transformative side of the continuum, infiltrating carceral structures with the goal of harm reduction (Gilmore, 2022). Transformative change is at the core of this dissertation.

According to a descriptive review of 51 peer-reviewed articles dealing with transformative change scholarship in community psychology, transformative change processes and actions are instrumental in understanding the nature of change in interventions (see Kivell et al., 2022). Transformative change internal processes imply a common understanding in organizing settings of shared values, visions, and

how systems shape social issues (Kivell et al., 2022). Indeed, "social change is not an end product but rather a process" (Rappaport, 1981). Transformative change actions include sustainability of action, ecological levels of analysis to increase actions' impact, engaging with actors surviving injustice, and resisting power (Kivell et al., 2022). This dissertation explores the embodiment of transformative change within organizing settings through processes and actions aiming for social transformation.

Transformative Change Processes

Next, we describe transformative change psychological processes in organizing settings relevant to this dissertation: discussing values, sharing power and decision-making, nurturing ethics of care, and ensuring accountability.

Values. Values shape how activist groups enact change in their communities. Indeed, a review of community psychology research recognized shared values as a salient dimension of transformative change processes (Kivell et al., 2023). A few studies explored in depth how values were discussed in transformative change settings. In a study, researchers analyzed 110 interviews with members of a women's rights organization in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, RAWA; Brodsky et al., 2011). Women reported gaining consciousness of patriarchal violence against women as a systemic issue that could be addressed collectively. By discussing their values in alignment with their goals, activists shared a growing sense that they could actualize their liberation. Activists believed that community change, education, and helping others were attainable goals

to ensure women's liberation under a shared commitment to each other as part of a values-centered organization.

Connecting values to goals has been suggested as necessary when starting partnerships in scholar-activist efforts (Langhout, 2012). Early conversations about values and goals might ensure the success and sustainability of collaborations in aiming for transformative change (Langhout, 2015). Indeed, aligning values and goals through practicing one's theory of change has been reported as essential in enacting change, based on a narrative analysis of famed intersectional feminist activist Grace Lee Boggs' oral history (Dutt & Grabe, 2014). Yet, much of the existing transformative change literature has focused more on identifying values that facilitate or block change than on uplifting empirical evidence of specific processes by which values are discussed and agreed upon in organizing settings (Kivell et al., 2023). Thus, there is a need for research that explores exactly how values are co-constructed within organizing settings and are then enacted to create liberated futures. How values are discussed and enacted in activist spaces might be an effective first step in sharing power.

Sharing Power and Decision-making. Learning about the ways organizers and care workers share power within their organizing settings is at the heart of studying how they enact transformative change and embody the liberation many seek in organizing spaces. Top-down decision-making tends to be used to hoard power by micromanaging activists with a sense of urgency, often leading to burnout (brown, 2017). There is a need to build power by co-creating decision-making processes

within minoritized communities (Christens & Speer, 2015). Activists may unsettle power differentials by democratizing decision-making within their organizing settings and sharing strategies to reach efficient consensus-making processes to promote actions toward justice (brown, 2017). How decisions are made in change-making settings has been a long interest of community psychologists (Kivell et al., 2023; Sarason, 1972). Yet, "relatively few research findings have been published that can effectively guide decision-making in organizing practice" (Christens & Speer, 2015, p. 212). Since then, there has been research on how activists aim to influence policy-related decision-making processes through civic engagement (Christens et al., 2023; McKeever et al., 2023), yet still little scholarship in psychology is available on how activists and organizers create and use decision-making processes to enact social change within their institutions and the communities they intend to serve (Kornbluh et al., 2020).

Perhaps the Zapatistas in southern Mexico, a decolonial Indigenous-led autonomous movement, can offer a great empirical example of how power can be decolonized and reclaimed by the people, ensuring consensus-based decision-making processes. Zapatista Indigenous people formed an autonomous government in southern Mexico due to centuries of economic exploitation and indifference from the Mexican state (Marcos, 2003). Zapatistas' participatory democracy ensures that every political decision is reached by gaining consensus at different stages in a three-leveled assembly consultation model (community, municipal councils, and regional assembly). Their Autonomous Government includes more than 1,000 Indigenous

communities encompassing more than 300,000 people (Starr et al., 2011). While a civic duty in more punitive societies relates to compulsory service on juries to judge people's actions sometimes leading to imprisonment, Zapatista's civic duty is compulsory participation for every person older than 15 years of age in assemblies in charge of policy-making. Assemblies oversee education, health, land, justice, culture, and more (Klein, 2015). Since important decisions need to be reached by consensus, assemblies often take longer, yet their decision-making is intended to include all people in their communities.

One Zapatista main organizing principle is *mandar obedeciendo* (i.e., ruling by obeying the people; Marcos, 2003). By sharing power to reorganize their society, Zapatistas push against domination-centered institutions that often exert power over people (Dussel, 2008). An obediential approach to power shapes Zapatista decision-making processes. Based on ethnographic research, including participant observation, field notes, and open interviews with community members, researchers learned from the Zapatista praxis of consensus decision-making in schools (Maldonado-Villalpando et al., 2022). Focusing on Caracol La Garrucha's community school, students learn how to civically engage in the Autonomous Government assembly system, learning by putting into practice their participatory democracy values (Maldonado-Villalpando et al., 2022). The school's pedagogical practices are horizontal. Students are encouraged to voice their concerns about instruction and help co-design curricula that fit their community's needs. Outside the classroom, apprenticeships promote local knowledge that can serve the community (Maldonado-

Villalpando et al., 2022). The Zapatistas' empirical example shares how power can be reclaimed by the people from institutions that often exert power in corrupt ways (Dussel, 2008). Although this is one clear example, more empirical research is needed in other contexts to uplift how power is decolonized, sharing decision-making in democratic ways to better serve minoritized communities. Perhaps sharing power and decision-making encourages organizers nurturing care as a practice in their activist community spaces.

Ethics of Care. An ethics of care within activist settings may unsettle neoliberal ideologies that focus on productivity at the expense of sustainability. By centering care, activists might respond to each other's needs, taking responsibility to steward collective spaces where activists may thrive and moving away from "[neo]liberal individualist morality [that] focuses on how we should leave each other alone" (Held, 2005, p. 14-15). Yet, authors have unsettled the false dichotomy bifurcating the individual and the collective when both forms of care can be co-opted to maintain the status quo (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018). Individually, self-care can co-opt care by facilitating indifference to the suffering of others, and collectively corporate welfare can co-opt care by weaponizing it through corporate-funded social responsibility projects that encourage the extraction of resources, harming Indigenous communities and the environment (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018; Gamu & Dauvergne, 2018). An ethics of care can be used to study care as a non-co-opted transformative change process, bridging self-care with collective care to address systemic inequities and promote the

psychological well-being of communities, centering social justice (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018).

Based on case studies of community-based action-research projects, researchers studied how a liberatory ethics of care promoted transformative change at different levels of analysis (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018). I share one case study, a youth participatory action research project to create a setting where youth would address issues that mattered to their community, facilitating social change. At the individual level, a Latinx youth working on the program nurtured their self-worth through the program, sharing, "if [participating in the program] helped me, why can't I help others and reach out to them?" (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018, p. 583). Indeed, the participant shared how her self-care was tied to her collective care by helping her community. At the community level, participants shared how youth's actions to address their issues allowed them to amplify stories of community belonging. A shared sense of belonging facilitated youth to unsettle dominant narratives of immigrant people not belonging to the U.S., encouraging solidarity between youth and other stakeholders by linking their fates together as a community (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018). A liberatory praxis of care as an internal process in organizing settings might encourage activists to work toward transformative change in sustainable ways.

This dissertation adds to the few research studies conducted on liberatory ethics of care, focusing on change-makers co-creating new processes to facilitate their impact in their communities. There is a need for research to better understand processes of care that ensure the sustainability of change-making grassroots efforts.

Organizers and care workers who experience ethics of care in their organizing settings might feel more emotionally supported to undertake issues in collaboration with other change-makers. Learning from activists enacting processes that promote care in their organizing settings might offer insights into ensuring care in other change-making settings. Yet, an ethics of care might not be effective unless accountability processes are created to address harm within organizing settings (Gilligan, 1982; Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018). Accountability seems necessary for activists to envision and actualize transformative change in their organizing settings.

Accountability. Accountability is an essential process for transformative change activism. Indeed, "accountability is key for building a lasting base; when folks see change, they feel their own investment is worthwhile" (brown, 2017, p. 38). One goal of transformative change activism is to practice liberation through internal processes that might facilitate moving forward from cycles of harm toward processes of care, accountability, and healing (brown, 2020). Transformative change collectives have the potential to embody the practice of justice outside carceral logics of punishment and dehumanization. Rather, transformative change activism can bring insights into engaging in generative conflict resolution that addresses and heals harm in community with others (brown, 2020).

There are some empirical examples of accountability processes in transformative change efforts. In one participatory action research multi-site study in collaboration with local non-profits, researchers and community facilitators amplified ways minoritized groups show solidarity with one another, facing systemic

inequalities (Shaw et al., 2020). Set in Uganda, the PAR collaborators trained facilitators from the community on power, democratic participation, and human rights awareness. The facilitator groups represented a diversity of minoritized groups, including youth, the elderly, women, and people with disabilities. Facilitators gathered stories from their communities to raise awareness about their intersecting struggles. The stories were then disseminated through a weekly theater play at a local radio station. The theater play was also shared with service providers and other stakeholders. Accountability was an external process to make decisions and actions answering to the community's needs, especially considering the inclusion of the most minoritized members. Yet, their paper did not share how accountability was ensured in the training meetings between facilitators and researchers, considering the power differentials.

Accountability between communities and social change activists has been explored through empirical work. A study analyzed participants' human rights work engaged in environmental and anti-globalization social movements holding ameliorative and transformative change goals (George et al., 2023). Using a critical dialogic accounting and accountability (CDAA) framework, researchers sought to learn from accountability mechanisms in social actions with transformative potential. CDAA uses an agonistic (i.e., adversarial) approach to unsettle the social order, or hegemonic ideologies that become common sense in society, reproducing the status quo and benefiting the most powerful (e.g., politicizing healthcare provider choice to argue against single-payer state-run healthcare as a human right). In an agonistic

framework, social order is a result of hegemonic misuses of power, shaping practices in particular socio-historical contexts (Mouffe, 2018). Thus, an agonistic approach assumes that the social order has been reconfigured through collective action and political struggle and can be transformed again through intersectional alliances of democratic movements coalescing against the currently reigning status quo (George et al., 2023). Researchers used thematic analysis to gain insights from interviews with 25 social movement activists (George et al., 2023). Some interviewees differentiated themselves from other non-profit activists who are more accountable to their funders, including corporations and international development organizations, than to the people they want to serve. Indeed, accountability is "about addressing power issues" (George et al., 2023, p. 9). Some participants pointed out how collaborations with corporations co-opted some social change actions to engineer consent from communities, holding the status quo intact. A participant highlighted the importance of actualizing accountability "both 'inside' and 'outside' the tent" (George et al., 2023, p. 12). Yet, the paper did not share insights into how activists engage in accountability processes within their organizing settings. Addressing power issues in organizing might require relational labor to move past issues.

Researchers published one study focusing on accountability processes through relational labor in a graduate student union organizing setting at a public university. The research team analyzed in-depth interviews with 12 participants, of whom only two reported being racially non-White and three reported being working class (Ellison & Langhout, 2020). The study focused on how participants experienced

complicity with oppressive systems while building intersectional solidarity. One accountability process was discerned from the interviews and questionnaires relevant to this study: relational labor. Relational labor is the emotional support activists offer to call-in each other when a transgression happens. Some white participants shared call-ins that were influential for them to become aware of their transgressions, moving past shame to be accountable for their actions. Yet, access to relational labor was often racialized, and offered more effectively to white activists than to activists of Color. White emotionality was centered many times. This study shared an accountability process within an organizing setting deemed 'transformative' by the mostly white and upper-class graduate student activists. Yet, according to the interviews, power issues around race, gender, and class were not fully addressed in the activist setting. Even when activists claim they are engaged in transformative work, they might still neglect to equitably redistribute relational labor, care, and accountability processes, often placing the burden disproportionately on their most minoritized members, particularly people of Color. My dissertation aims to learn from accountability processes that might facilitate actualizing the liberation ideal to which transformative activists might aim, enacting the racially just and equitably worlds they seek. One such liberatory practice that is used to promote healthy accountability mechanisms in organizing spaces are circles.

Circles. Circle practices are rooted in Indigenous practices that center relationality and communal living (Kaba, 2021; Winn, 2023). They are community-initiated efforts that promote restoration and reconciliation, enhancing the visibility of people,

particularly from minoritized backgrounds, when harm or conflict occurs, and fostering accountability (Kaba, 2021). Circles are expansive in their use: they facilitate connection through regular check-ins, celebrate collective accomplishments, and provide support during tragedies. A circle's relational approach is often grounded in restorative justice principles, emphasizing building and maintaining relationships while addressing harm and promoting community healing.

Restorative justice efforts are often posed as an alternative to carceral systems, moving away from punitive measures to focus on building and healing relationships. While US carceral systems respond to harm by identifying culprits, the nature of their offense, and punitive consequences they 'deserve,' restorative justice aims to identify "who was harmed? What are their needs? Who is obligated to meet those needs?" (Winn, 2023, p. 158) to ensure accountability by addressing those needs. By promoting a relational response to harm, circles emphasize collective responses to violence and systemic harm while rejecting reliance on punitive measures of carcerality that often reproduce more harm (Kim, 2021; Winn, 2023).

Circles are often used to facilitate stakeholders sharing their perspectives on an issue, coalescing around common values, retaking agency by fostering generative dialogue, and working collaboratively to address the problem as a collective (Winn, 2023). They are facilitated in a myriad of settings, from schools to the community. In educational settings, circles may contribute to civic engagement by embodying values of solidarity, relational well-being, and shared responsibility for each other (Winn, 2023). In an interview study with school circle keepers in a midwestern school,

students of Color and women reclaim their agency as circle keepers, shared leadership roles to address interpersonal issues, and journaled together to improve their abilities to address problems through dialogue within the circle (Winn, 2018). Furthermore, accountability circles, such as Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA), are instrumental in preventing further harm by providing emotional support for offenders in the community. Originating from parishioners, CoSA involves volunteers forming an inner circle to reduce the risk of reoffending through consistent support (Kaba, 2021). Thus, circles co-create settings where people can make reparations to address current harm, build networks of support to prevent future harm, and collectively aim to address the systemic underpinnings of harmful actions, promoting healing (Kaba, 2021). Yet, research on circles as a transformative change process within organizing and care work settings is a nascent field of study (Kim, 2021; Winn, 2023). Circles have the potential to be transformative change practices reshaping educational and community environments. By fostering a relational accountability approach to address conflict and harm, circles contribute to the remaking of alternatives outside carceral forms of punishment, moving toward collective restitution and social change.

In sum, transformative change processes have the potential to facilitate the liberation many of us would like to see in society. Social change researchers can learn how activists share power and decision-making, acknowledging and celebrating change-makers expertise and practicing liberation within their organizing settings. Such studies can aid efforts to replace carceral logics that reproduce the status quo

with care-centric processes that actualize accountability within activist communities. Some studies share insightful results on how social change efforts can be accountable to communities they say they want to serve. Yet, there is a need for research on the internal processes facilitating the transformative work of grassroots change-making collectives. Research is needed to understand how people facilitate circles, trusting other change-makers to have their backs in addressing conflict and harm when promoting change in their communities. This dissertation explores how organizers and care workers enact internal transformative change processes within organizing settings, such as sharing power and decision-making, instilling ethics of care between activists, and ensuring accountability when harm is done. Such transformative change practices might shape actions that enact transformation in the community.

Transformative Change Actions

Transformative external actions are collective undertakings through which activists may realize their visions of change, as actions outline how change-makers co-create interventions to address issues in transformative ways (Kivell et al., 2022; Riemer et al., 2020). According to a descriptive review of 51 peer-reviewed community psychology articles on transformative change, researchers discerned dimensions of transformative change actions in North American settings: "planning for the long-term…nature of transformation, targeting multiple levels…, engaging in solidarity with those most impacted by…injustice, and identify[ing] and resist[ing] power…structures" (Kivell et al., 2022, p. 10).

Planning for the Long-term. Actions with transformational goals take time and resources. They often require a long-term sustained focus, regrettably demanding "time and resources from people who can least afford it" (Chavis, 2001, p. 315; Kivell et al., 2022). Yet, interventions can be greatly impactful when adequately resourced to meet long-term goals. In one empirical example, researchers compared interventions run by sex workers in India and South Africa (Cornish & Campbell, 2009). Researchers identified key factors that allowed the India peer education transformative action to be sustainable over time. The India intervention involved community members in the planning and implementation, considering their local context, with consistent support from community practitioners (Cornish & Campbell, 2009). Thus, a long-term approach that embraced the expertise of community members was more effective for the sustainability of the action. One approach to increase sustainability is to develop actions approaching a problem at different levels of analysis.

Targeting Multiple Levels of Analysis. To ensure transformative actions aim for liberation, there is a need to target an issue at multiple levels of analysis, considering how the macro level shapes each level (e.g., carcerality-induced ideologies tied to fixed hierarchies; Kivell et al., 2022; Prilleltensky, 2012). The descriptive review of empirical articles on transformative change suggested that actions should stem away from being pre-designed, instead being co-constructed based on the local context (Kivell et al., 2022). Actions reviewed tended to be more effective when they targeted not just individuals but also addressed relational, organizational, and ideological

levels. Collaborative efforts that involved minoritized community members proved to be particularly impactful, such as co-developing strategies to address issues, engaging in collective decision-making to distribute resources, and aligning goals with community needs.

Engaging in Solidarity with Those Most Impacted by Injustice. To promote transformative actions, there is a need to center the experiences and voices of those most impacted by oppression (Kivell et al., 2022). People surviving oppression have valuable expertise and knowledge that can significantly shape the implementation of transformative actions and interventions. For example, involving youth in participatory action research projects - where they play active roles and engage in critical reflection of systems shaping social issues - has been effective in facilitating youth becoming agents of change (Ren & Langhout, 2010; Kivell et al., 2022; Kohfeldt et al., 2011). Furthermore, it is important to consider the added risks and safety concerns minoritized people inherently have when engaging in transformative actions (Brodsky et al., 2011; Kivell et al., 2022). Thus, there is a need to consider power in transformative change actions.

Identify and Resist Power Structures. Transformative change entails shifting power relations, aiming to redistribute societal power (Kivell et al., 2022). Thus, transformative change actions must unsettle power structures in their pursuit of liberation. Research suggests engaging with current powerful stake-holders to encourage them to work with transformative change actors (Christens et al., 2014; Kivell et al., 2022). Indeed, working with policy-makers may facilitate the success of

some transformative change actions (Goodkind et al., 2010; Kivell et al., 2022). Yet, transformative actions' goals must avoid being co-opted by dominant groups hoarding power.

Kivell et al. (2022) offered a helpful review of transformative change actions., Transformative change actions arise from an understanding that change takes place throughout long periods by addressing issues at different levels of analysis, including but transcending the individual (i.e., interpersonal, organizational, communal; Prilleltensky, 2012). Transformative change actions are often co-constructed to show solidarity with minoritized people surviving conditions of injustice, aiming to resist and upend systems of power that harm them (Kivell et al., 2022). My dissertation learns from how change-makers envision liberation by taking actions to find ways to build change through a common vision of liberation (brown, 2017; Kivell et al., 2022).

Transformative processes and actions are most relevant for this proposal, learning from activists' experiences promoting transformative change processes within their organizing settings and transformative change actions in the communities they intend to serve. I learn from organizers and care workers regarding how society can be transformed, bottom-up (from the grassroots) and inside-out (from activist settings to the communities they serve).

The Present Study

Similar to other empirical interview studies (Atallah, 2017; Atallah et al., 2018; Quayle & Sonn, 2019; Segalo et al., 2015), this dissertation takes an liberatory

approach to study how activists enact transformative change processes in their organizing settings to shape their transformative change actions envisioning liberation. This study explores how activists co-construct a world where many worlds can fit (Marcos, 2003). We explore transformative change processes and actions that may facilitate people's engagement in organizing and care work to ensure every person, especially the most minoritized, have a fair chance to radiate light from the forest canopy to the understory of the forest, and contribute to our communities. We hope to learn how activists organize "based in (sic) love and care rather than burnout and competition" (brown, 2017, p. 34). People enacting transformative change may assert their humanity by promoting love and understanding for each other and their communities (Maldonado-Torres, 2016). Our research question is: How are organizers, care workers, and service providers envisioning, embodying, and acting upon the transformative change they want to see in society? While some studies have explored transformative change processes within research collaborations and community interventions, seldom researchers have focused on how organizers and care workers embody the social justice values they have and grow toward fairer ways of co-existence. This dissertation aims to fill that gap by highlighting change-makers efforts and knowledge that branch out toward liberation. Next, we share details on the dissertation's methods.

Chapter 2: Methods

Reflexivity

Reflexivity practices are ways by which researchers aim to be transparent on how their experiences shape research projects in relation to their social positions, epistemic understandings, and assumptions (Lazard & McAvoy, 2020). In other words, reflexive practices can make visible how researchers' subjectivity shape their research praxis. Based on an APA Publication and Communication Board task force, reflexivity practices are now expected to appear in qualitative and mixed-methods research reports (Levitt et al., 2018). I have critically reflected how my educational, mixed-class upbringing and current circumstances, navigating a gender non-conforming identity while having a cis-gender expression, heterosexual, and authorized documentation privilege positions informs my perspectives and interpretations in this research. These aspects of my identity and social positioning inevitably shaped my interactions with participants and my understanding of the data, as I understand social science knowledge is context-bound and subjective.

As part of my earlier Counseling Psychology graduate program, I saw firsthand how systemic issues such as gendered domestic violence, low-wage work, racist criminalization, and housing insecurity directly impacted my clients. The latter issues resonated with past low-wage work experiences of housekeeping and painful discriminatory experiences facing xenophobia, racism, English-as-a-second language imperialism, classism, and ableism as a Brown neurodiverse Spanish speaking immigrant in the U.S. I saw the importance of working in the therapy room with each

client and understood that systems would keep impacting my clients' mental health if said systems remained unchanged. This realization drew me to collaborate on research that aims to tackle some of the systemic causes of my clients' presenting issues. My positional and academic background not only informs my understanding of systemic issues but also influences my commitment to organizing and activism, where I have learned how people both create systems of harm and can transform those very systems.

The topic of the psychology of transformative change is dear to my heart. As I have personally navigated and survived systemic oppression and professionally supported other minoritized people in doing similarly, I am hopeful about the potential avenues people take to unsettle systems. Having explored activism with electoral politics in Peru, I saw first-hand how people with positional power, such as men, hoard power and co-opt social justice discourse to center themselves, their privileged worldviews, and their personal ambitions. Similarly, I have had insightful experiences in on-campus labor organizing and serving in departmental and academic senate committees that inspired my interest in embodying social change and social justice values. In those spaces, I noticed some people from privileged social positions used their unexamined power to set the agenda, impose their perspectives on decision-making and task allocation, and hoard resources. I saw the need and potential for power-sharing to accomplish transformative goals. I realized that praxis, or the embodiment of social justice values through practices and actions, is at the core of actualizing the socially just worlds many organizers and academics long for by

actualizing their values within the understory of their organizing settings, particularly with people with less societal and institutional power. These insights significantly influenced my dissertation focus, guiding me to learn directly from experts themselves on their transformative efforts to reshape society.

Alongside co-researchers, I aim to embrace my subjectivity by reflecting on my preconceptions of the studied phenomena and actively examining how these shape our analysis and interpretations (see Research Team sub-section below on the Analysis Strategies subsection in this chapter for more). Some of those preconceptions stem from my growing awareness of privileged positions and perspectives based on misinformation I am committed to unlearning, for instance in relation to toxic masculinity. Other assumptions are based on acknowledging that as oppressions exist and dominator culture stiffels our imagination to commit to ending systems of oppression, throughout human history systems have been created, changed, and dismantled. For example, my experiences of racial profiling as a Brown immigrant have informed how I approached discussions analyzing participants' efforts to redirecting resources from policing and criminalization to care work, addressing the very circumstances - such as low wage work and houselessness - that allow minoritized people to be criminalized and targeted by carcerality.

Through my engagement in community psychology with my advisor, I learned that the systems of oppression limiting our pursuit of hopes and dreams are not timeless - they were created only a few centuries ago and can be upended, as they have been many times before. As a budding community psychologist in constant

learning and unlearning, I intend to base my life's work on learning and highlighting the knowledge of people who are taking efforts to dismantle systems through transformative practices at the community-level. Some of my preconceptions stem from a critical psychology onto-epistemology, through which I understand how power, privilege, and oppression shape people's knowledge and lived experiences, and I take a stance to learn with others how to unsettle power to co-create more equitable and justice-driven practices to reorganize our societies, from the grassroots level (more information on epistemologies on the next section).

My critical psychology onto-epistemology shaped our research processes, and we utilized a myriad of strategies to make that visible. Our research team engaged in a learning and unlearning process by critically engaging with presentations and readings about critical onto-epistemologies, transformative change literature from community psychology and other disciplines, and reflexive thematic analysis. Our research team utilized memos we wrote after listening to each interview, early familiarization notes after transcriptions, and peer debriefing of interview analysis through paired and group dialogue. Our reflexive practices were ongoing and continued through interview collection, analysis, and results reporting, as we report in the data analysis sub-section.

After finalizing our research process for this dissertation, I reflected on our research as a whole. I am deeply appreciative and honored by the opportunity to have learned from impactful organizers and care workers with such principled ethics and integrity, who co-create spaces embodying the liberated worlds their work aims to

advance. Conducting this research during such a politically tumultuous time, both on campus and abroad, was both challenging and inspiring. It provided opportunities for our research team and graduate student colleagues to also embody social justice values through action. These experiences underscored the deep interconnection between my research and service in solidarity with liberation struggles and their allies in student movements. Lessons learned from our participants' praxis shaped both our research team analysis meetings and our service to the student community and beyond. I conducted this research in the hopes that the insights from our analysis of participants' interviews could inform my teaching of transformative change within social-community psychology and more, and perhaps inspire other researchers to keep expanding the study of the psychology of social change. My hopes were surpassed. Participants' visions, practices, and actions of transformative change allowed the research team to see the world is changing, with visions of more just worlds being asserted through praxis. Even in contentious times, we hear the winds of social change tenderly dancing between the leaves, breathing hope into existence within the understory of social transformation (Roy, 2003).

Epistemology

A critical psychology epistemic approach with a social justice mission recenters minoritized ways of knowing that counter and provide alternatives to dominant ideologies and systems of harm in promoting the wellness and welfare of their communities (Atallah & Masud, 2023; Fox et al., 2009; Makkawi, 2009; Maldonado-Torres, 2017). One goal for this study is to bring to academic discourse

the expertise and knowledge of change-makers such as organizers and care workers building power to promote justice and equity in their communities (Dutta et al., 2022; Maldonado-Torres, 2017). To do so more effectively, critical psychology social justice research encourages embracing subjectivity in the search for liberation (Fox et al., 2009; Rodriguez & Langhout, 2023). It allows researchers to deeply reflect on the practice of social justice values through research, with the goal of co-constructing knowledge that reasserts minoritized people's humanity, redirecting the focus from their suffering to their strengths. We engaged in critical research by actively reading and discussing literature and presentations I created on systems change, transformative change, and critical psychology epistemologies. We also incorporated current articles and books on abolition, specifically focusing on work by abolitionist organizers and scholar-activists (DaViera et al., 2024; Hayes & Kaba, 2023). This foundational knowledge directly informed our approach to analysis, ensuring that our research was grounded in the principles of social transformation and justice. We aimed to conduct research that shines a light on change-makers' liberating efforts, co-creating fairer ways to reorganize their communities.

Participants and Setting

I interviewed activists and care workers engaged in transformative change work. I initially aimed to recruit around 15 participants. The sample size was determined according to the suggestion of a review of sample size saturation in qualitative research for interviews (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Saturation is "the point at which gathering more data about a theoretical construct reveals no new properties"

(Charmaz & Bryant, 2010, p. 611). Yet, while collecting data and conducting preliminary interview analysis, we realized saturation would be difficult to achieve since my participants stemmed from multiple organizations within different physical locations and social contexts. Rather, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022), an information power approach to assess sample size might be more aligned with critical epistemologies as it focuses on the data richness in relation to the research goals rather than "precise calculations" which might be more appropriate with experiments and post-positivist approaches to qualitative research in psychology (p. 81). In particular, an information power approach was useful to address the study's critical psychology aims to address power and oppression, the contextual particularities of the studied sample, and analytic strategies are considered to assess an appropriate sample size (Malterud et al., 2016). There are three dimensions of the information power approach relevant to our study: (a) A *narrow study aim* on transformative change allowed for participant recruitment on organizations that aimed for transformative change as identified by their mission, vision, and values statements and/or suggested by other participants through snowball sampling. (b) Aiming for quality of dialogue through a semi-structured interview approach nurtured focused conversation that uplifted participants' knowledge most relevant to the research topic. (c) A cross-case exploratory analytics strategy of interviews required a suitable sample size of participants to pinpoint a multiplicity of perspectives on their transformative change experiences. Hence, an information power recruitment approach in alignment with our critical epistemic approach, study aims, strong quality of dialogue, and cross-case

exploratory analytic strategies addressed our transformative change research topic while considering the time constrictions of the dissertation defense timeline (Malterud et al., 2016). The total sample size is 25 participants, out of whom 17 participants were selected for analysis through identifying interviews with a strong quality of dialogue, and sharing information most aligned with the research question (see Table 1). The interviews included in the analysis were the most relevant in addressing the research question according to after-interview memos and/or familiarization notes. The interviews that were excluded belonged to: (1) participants whose organizations already had representation in our sample, because of the nature of snowball sampling, or (2) participants who did not currently have an organization or organizing group to discuss, or who did not feel comfortable discussing their experiences from a previous organizing group.

Table 1

Pseudonym	Organization's focus	Age range	Gender	Ethnicity	Meaningful identities shared
T	Care providing, Harm reduction	30-40	Gender Queer	Asian	Queer
JC	Harm reduction	40-50	Cis man	Black	Formerly incarcerated
SR	Harm reduction	30-40	Cis woman	Latina	
EM	Harm reduction	40-50	Cis woman	White	Queer, abolitionist, anti-racist
Blue	Care providing, Harm reduction	30-40	Cis woman	Black	
LMA	Healing justice	40-50	Femme	Mixed-race, Native, Mexican, White	Queer, parent

Margo	Care providing	30-40	Cis woman	Asian	Healthcare professional
Amina	Harm reduction, scholar-activism	40-50	Cis woman	Asian	Muslim
ME	Care providing	50-60	Cis woman	Latina	Daughter of immigrants
Steve	Scholar-activism	40-50	Cis man	White American	Academic
Olivia Jane	Care providing	40-50	Cis woman	Black	Feminist, leftist, faith
RJ J	Care providing, Harm reduction	30-40	Cis man	Black	
NH	Care providing, Harm reduction	70-80	Cis woman	Latino Indigenous	Non-profit director

PS	Anti-racism, harm reduction	50-60	Cis woman	White, Irish-Polish	Mother, teacher, Queer
Kelly	Organizing, media	40-50	Non-binary	Native	Queer
Fatima	Mediator, organizer	30-40	Cis woman	White	Working class, high-school dropout, Muslim
CS	Scholar	50-60	Queer woman	Ch'ixi, mixed race	Mexican roots in México profundo

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants Note. Participants shown in the table (n=17) were selected for this dissertation manuscript by an information power sampling strategy, assessing which interviews were most relevant to the study’s aims of creating evidence on transformative change and dissertation timeline constrictions (Malterud et al., 2016). Participants whose interviews were selected for full analysis were identified out of a larger pool of interviewed participants (N=25). Most participants chose their pseudonyms. Sometimes participants chose initials or consented to have initials used when they did not know what pseudonym to share.

Demographic characteristics such as age ranges and ethnicities were presented in more generic ways than shared by participants to protect their identities and ensure their anonymity. Similarly, the populations served by participants could potentially identify them, which is why several participants explicitly requested not to share this information. Sharing some participants' information while withholding others' could also compromise their anonymity. The column with meaningful identities includes labels reported verbatim by participants in the post-interview demographic survey, when they were asked which identities were most meaningful to them.

To recruit participants, I used a combination of criterion and purposive-snowball sampling focusing on participants whose organizations stated transformative change potential in their mission and vision statements, including immigrant justice organizations. The selection criteria include being part of an activist space or care organization that aims to enact transformative change in local communities for over one year and older than 18 years. I recruited activists and care workers involved in transformative change in the San Francisco Bay Area and other parts of the country, such as Chicago. Once I established contact and scheduled interviews with participants, I gathered contact information to recruit more participants (i.e., snowball sampling).

I started the snowball sampling with a care worker in a transformative change organization suggested by a former graduate student of my advisor and a scholar-activist whose research is in the psychology of activism. From that initial participant's outstanding interview, I was able to recruit nine total participants

through snowball sampling, most of whom were abolitionists. After those interviews, and reflecting on my after-interview memos and the relevant insights participants offered in connection to my research question, I decided to aim to recruit more abolitionist participants while also including participants who were not abolitionists but seemed to have transformative goals. The paragraph below provides the reasoning behind this approach. I recruited five other participants through conferences and events that welcomed activists, organizers, and scholar-activists. Seven participants were suggested by my advisor, other faculty and colleagues, and activist friends. After I verifyied they worked in or volunteered for organizations with websites that had transformative goals in their stated mission and vision, I proceeded to contact them. Finally, I recruited four participants from websites I found from a network of BIPOC leaders in a local community related to a participant suggested by my advisor and a website of a collective in solidarity with a decolonial struggle in Latin America.

I aimed to recruit organizer participants and care workers who identified as abolitionists because an abolitionist stance requires transforming oppressive systems and opening pathways toward justice. Many of these participants were identified as abolitionists by other participants through snowball sampling, as well as by colleagues and scholar-activists with whom I am acquainted. Yet, I also recruited participants engaged in transformative change work beyond an abolitionist framework because of the challenges in recruiting abolitionist organizers and care workers over the past year, possibly due to the limited capacity many abolitionists faced amid a contentious economic and political climate in the US, influenced by

inflation, the upcoming presidential election, and widespread peace social movements protesting US support for Israel's war on Gaza. Additionally, I wanted to include care workers and organizers who may not identify as abolitionist but could still be involved in transformative work across the ameliorative and transformative change continuum. Grant funding allowed me to offer $50 gift cards to each activist for 1-2 hours of interviews.

Ethics and Informed Consent

The interviews were anonymized in the transcripts and kept confidential. Through the informed consent process, participants were informed that the interview would be recorded and de-identified, and their insights would inform efforts to learn from transformative change processes with a social-community psychology approach (see Appendix 1 for a print version of the Informed Consent). Participants read and signed the Informed Consent in Qualtrics. Through the recruitment email and at the beginning of each interview, I shared my social positions and experiences in organizing with participants to build rapport (please see Appendix 2 Interview Protocol for the script and the exact wording I used).

Qualitative Research Collection Strategies

I used a semi-structured interview approach to examine how activists and care workers enact change within and outside their organizing spaces (see Appendix 2 Interview Protocol). The interview protocol aimed to gain participants' insights into three domains of transformative change (TC): visions, organizational processes, and external actions.

The TC visions domain covers participants' theory of change, or how they envision change could happen and lead to ideal conditions of co-existence in their communities (Kelley, 2022). Activists may actualize their theory of change within their organizational change processes. The TC organizational processes domain explores how activists discuss and enact their theory of change and values, share power and decision-making, build trust in the reliability of other activists (i.e., ontological security), instill a culture of care amongst their members, and ensure accountability processes that promote collective well-being and the sustainability of their activism, among other approaches. Activists may enact change in their organizing settings through these organizational processes that might embody the change activists seek in the outside world. The TC external actions domain aims to gain insights into what transformative change external actions activists have been part of and what made activists deem such actions effective. This last domain's goal is to learn how change-makers redistribute psychological and material resources to the communities they are serving (Bell et al., 2020; Kelley, 2022).

Beyond the three TC domains, I included questions about participant's entry points to change work and how they defined the nature of their work. Because most participants collaborated in change work through non-profit organizations, I inquired about the social context of their organizations and the populations they served. At the end of the interview, I asked them about the challenges to their work and how they surpassed them. Since the interview had a semi-structured format, it allowed me to

ask follow-up questions according to particular snippets of knowledge shared by participants that needed unpacking.

Qualitative Research Analyses Strategies

Research Team

Hands-on knowledge about the topic can assist in analyzing participants' transformative change experiences in relational ways. Thus, I recruited one Psychology graduate in the midst of graduate school applications who collaborated with me in deciding our analysis strategies, co-facilitating analysis sessions, and providing thoughtful feedback on this dissertation. Together, we mentored two Psychology major research assistants with experience and interest in activism or care work to engage in research. For one academic quarter, we discussed specific readings about critical approaches to qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Le Grice & Braun, 2018; Saldana, 2021), liberation and systems thinking (Hafer & Choma, 2009; Rappaport et al., 1975; Tuck, 2009), and transformative change (Kivell et al., 2023; Riemer et al., 2020; Rodriguez Ramirez & Langhout, 2023) broadly and, when available, about each participant's organization. The research team was diverse from multiple racial, gender, class and sexual orientation social positions. When possible, we assigned research team members from similar racial, gender, class, and locational backgrounds as participants. For example, if a participant was Black and Queer, the interview would be analyzed and reviewed by Black and Queer team members. Our research team included people who were Black, Latinx, Asian, White, Queer, non-binary, working poor, and based in California.

Reflexivity processes were embedded across our analysis to reflect on how the research team's experiences and backgrounds shaped the research study in two ways: (1) by writing familiarization notes about our preconceptions and assumptions of our analysis (see Appendix 3: Familiarization Questions for Research Team for specific familiarization questions and see further details on the familiarization process in the Analysis sub-section on p. 45); and (2) by continuously discussing our analysis as a team through analysis meetings twice a week, where we had honest conversations about how our social identities, ideologies, and experiences influenced our understanding of our research and the parts of the interview we identified as most relevant to our research topic. Our research team aimed for strong objectivity by creating a community of researchers from activist backgrounds but diverse racial/ethnic, class, sexual orientation, gender identities, and legal statuses to engage in dialogue, bringing their different perspectives and backgrounds to the foreground (Fine & Torre, 2019). We aimed to create a culture of collaboration in the research team, where researchers' perspectives and shared experiences with participants (e.g., being a non-binary immigrant researcher helping analyze a non-binary immigrant activist's interview) would help the research team make meaning of our participants' stories (Fine & Torre, 2019). Radical relationality was embodied in our analysis as a move toward critical research by putting our experiences of activism and care work in conversation with our participants' experiences while ensuring a culture of care among the research team (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018). One of our goals was to model in our research team the transformative change processes we study.

Analysis

As a reminder, our research question is: How are organizers, care workers, and service providers envisioning, embodying, and acting upon the transformative change they want to see in society? The analysis began with interview transcriptions. Researchers transcribed interviews verbatim. Verbal vocalizations were also transcribed. Specifically, we recorded voice tone, pauses, and speech tics that helped us analyze participant's stories. Transcriptions were checked for accuracy by another team member. After transcribing interviews, we conducted a reflexive thematic analysis of interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Trustworthiness in reflexive thematic analysis with a critical psychology approach can be assessed by engaging in dialogue within the analysis team, all of whom shared some social positions and backgrounds with some of the participants. The goal was to embrace discussion and divergence, embracing different perspectives in the analysis. To do so, each team member kept a reflexivity journal to record our preconceptions and emotional responses to each interview through the first step of our reflexive thematic analysis.

We used a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) of interviews, given it is a critical approach to qualitative analysis that delineates structured processes that are also flexible to fit the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Reflexivity practices critically embrace researchers' subjectivity as an asset in the analysis. Through qualitative research approaches such as RTA, researchers' ways of understanding knowledge-production and values are made visible. They shape the research products just as data shapes our thinking and understanding of our topics in dialectical ways.

Following RTA guidelines, we engaged in two rounds of analysis for each interview, while being reflexive on how our identities and backgrounds shape each step in the process (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Next we generated, reviewed, and defined themes to delineate connecting threads of knowledge across interviews to address the research topic.

In the first round of analysis, or familiarization, each team member read their assigned interviews, focusing on each interview individually and thinking about how they connected more broadly to the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2021). We noted instances of emotional resonance throughout the interviews (Tolman & Head, 2021). For each interview, we created individual Reading Responses that documented our preliminary analysis in relation to the RQ (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Tolman & Head, 2021). Our reading responses addressed three dimensions of early analysis: (1) Relevancy of the interview as a whole and through its parts to our research question; (2) a reflection of analyzers' emotional response and assumptions about participants' responses; and (3) an analysis of participants' social positions of power shaping their ideologies, beliefs, and attitudes toward social change (please see Appendix 3: Familiarization Questions for Research Team for details on the questions). Our familiarization process involved writing familiarization notes after an initial reading of an interview, which were then sent to me (Daniel) for feedback. We would discuss the revised notes in our analysis meetings, where I provided additional context about the organization, if needed, before proceeding with the analysis. I kept a detailed sheet with participants' information, including their organizations, websites,

demographic data from the post-interview survey, and key notes from my after-interview memos, for reference as necessary. Reflexivity was key throughout the familiarization process, as suggested by the familiarization question topics mentioned earlier on this paragraph and in Appendix 3. By encouraging self-reflection on our emotional responses and assumptions about the data, and by discussing our notes as a team, we aimed to ensure open conversations about preconceptions and reactions to the data, in ways that honored participants' stories.

On the second round of analysis, or code conceptualization, we reread the interviews to identify data segments that were particularly relevant to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2021). We contextualized them according to the information gathered about each setting and what was shared about each organization during interviews. From this point on, we used Atlas.ti for our analysis, which is a qualitative analysis software that can be well aligned with RTA (Hecker & Kalpokas, n.d.). As we reread the interviews, we individually highlighted interview segments relevant to the research topic that we discerned belonged within a code and wrote a label for each. Code labels succinctly captured our analytic takes - noticing patterns in the data while including our own subjectivities, thoughts, and analyses. When creating a novel code, we briefly commented on its relevance to the research question. Once a code was assigned to interview erxcepts across several interviews with participants from different organizations, we collated the code into a codes document. As expected, codes and their corresponding labels shifted throughout this analysis stage to better represent the data's diverse meanings. For example, we

merged codes named “keep learning” and “knowledge is power” to “cultivating knowledge is power” to better capture how fostering knowledge within community members can facilitate accountability from organizations to the community, while providing knowledge and support needed for community members to embrace their roles as agents of change.

We began generating initial themes once we finalized the coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In this phase, our focus shifted from a small, detailed scale to a broader, more macro scale that captured meanings across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). We compiled the codes we created into themes organized around core ideas and concepts that connected explicitly to our research topic (i.e., transformative change visions, processes, and actions). We initially had several codes that could expand in becoming potential themes. Through analysis team meetings, we narrowed down and combined codes and potential themes to best capture our dataset's nuances and multiplicity of perspectives as responses related to our research question. We collated all codes in a shared Google Document, and discussed how to group these codes into larger themes. We then reviewed coded data belonging to these newly formed group codes and engaged in discussions to determine if the data collectively reflected the larger theme. The team then created themes and visual maps to identify common patterns and discrepancies between participants’ interviews. We reviewed themes in connection to co-constructing stories that addressed our research question in conversation with what participants said was most important for them to share. We also considered relationships between themes, particularly contradictions, which

could help us understand nuances. Finally, we named and defined themes according to the argument I (Daniel) was building to highlight participants' insights to address our research topic. Our goal was to discern rich and nuanced understandings of our interviews through themes to inform writing a research report on the different dimensions of the research topics.

Chapter 3: The Forest Understory of Social Change

In the following three chapters, as is typically observed in qualitative research reporting, we present both the results and discussion. The insights shared stem from a reflexive thematic analysis of the qualitative semi-structured interviews we conducted on participants' embodiment of the social change they envision that might lead to the liberated worlds to which they long.

In the current chapter, we provide an overview of the results and introduce a framework for visualizing them, which we depict as a knowledge forest. We then delve into the theories of change most prevalent in participants' stories, establishing the context needed to understand the results and address the research questions. This chapter serves as the contextual foundation of our research, presenting the understory of social change as shared by our participants, with a particular focus on abolition as a prevalent theory of change.

In subsequent chapters, which are more conventional results chapters, we share the themes discerned from our analysis, which depict the most salient patterns from the knowledge generously shared by participants. The results' themes are thus divided into two separate but interconnected chapters: In Chapter 4, we explore 'Tree Roots: Internal Organizational Transformative Change Practices,' and in Chapter 5 we examine 'Tree Branches: External Community-based Transformative Change Actions.'

Given my research question focuses on participants' embodiment of transformative change within organizations' settings and communities they aim to

serve, the themes we discerned appear as both practices and actions. This overlap is intentional, as it illustrates how the internal organizational practices of social change shape actions and programming in the community, thereby directly addressing our research question. The themes include examples of transformative change from participants' lived experiences, and well as some contradictions and challenges within each theme. We conclude each chapter with a summary, leading into the last chapter.

Looking in the Understory of the Forest

> *What we are talking about [...] is that [we're] in the understory of a forest right beneath the sort of visible canopy of the tree line. There's all this life happening.* There are all these fungi and mosses [...] and things that most people don't see unless they venture deep into the forest. And all of that life sustains everything that you do see. And this is how I think about what it means to be in community [...] *We're talking about people who are part of that understory of movements. We're constantly involved in the work of collective survival, in the work of organizing, in the work of building relationships and building power.*[2]
>
> \- Kelly[3]

Based on participant interviews, we share the results using the imagery of a forest, with internal organizational change practices as roots and change actions in the community as branches. Seen in trees and throughout nature, fractals are incremental forms and shapes that build on each other (brown, 2017). Fractals visually represent trees and forests, exemplified by how redwoods grow in circular family clusters, demonstrating nature's interdependence (Lorimer, 1994). Tree roots and branches mirror each other in self-similar fractal patterns, part of a larger living network that

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[2] I added emphasis on italicized sentences within participants quotes to stress their significance.
[3] Participants have chosen the names they wish to use in this dissertation. Some have left their names and some chose pseudonyms.

operates harmoniously and sustainably within a complex system (brown, 2017; Eloy, 2011). As Kelly hinted in the opening quote, forests can portray the understory of social change movements, their inner breathing lifeforce, under what's visible. Forests' roots may depict seemingly small incremental change practices at the interpersonal and organizational levels that might fractally shape branched actions toward justice in the community, embodying the change many would like to see below the visible tree canopy (brown, 2017; Hayes & Kaba, 2023). Indeed, rooted transformative change practices anchor the tree deep into the ground, providing stability and necessary nutrients for the branched transformative change actions, helping the tree expand and thrive. Tree fractals are used as a metaphor that captures the nuanced web of interconnections between the root of transformative change practices and branching actions actualizing a more equitable world in the making. Both roots and branches are connected to the tree as part of a holistic whole (see Image 1 below).

Figure 1

Results' Visualization: The Tree Understory of Social Change

Note. The figure above illustrates our results. The themes of transformative change internal organizational practices, depicted as being under the soil, shaped the external actions in the community, which are represented by corresponding themes above the soil. These social change practices, rooted in participants' organizations, and the resulting branched community actions are fractally and holistically interconnected by participants' abolitionist visions, collectively embodying visions of social transformation. The purple arrow connects the entire tree to the context of abolitionist visions, which is a contextual construct that represents most of our participants' theory of change. The brown arrows connect the roots to the themes of internal organizational transformative change practices, whereas the green arrows represent how these practices shaped actions in the community, directly addressing the research

question on the embodiment of social change from within organizations to the community.

Visions and Theories of Transformative Change

I start by offering an organizing section establishing the abolitionist context of our participants. In this section, we explore participants' abolitionist visions, beginning with an examination of how transformative and ameliorative work exists on a spectrum, much like abolitionist and reformist efforts. To address my research question, we focus on the more abolitionist and transformative ends of this spectrum. We then share a participant's definition of abolitionist visions and their theories of change, providing a deeper understanding of these concepts. Finally, we highlight one participant's experience of surviving carceral systems and systemic entrapment, which contextualizes the broader call from participants to abolish these harmful systems. This section concludes with a call to action for academics to contribute to dismantling such structures.

As mentioned in the introduction, transformative and ameliorative change fall along either end of a spectrum (Kivell et al., 2023). Social change practices and actions often fall at different places within the transformative-ameliorative continuum. Because one of the purposes of this study is to highlight innovative ways to embody social change on the transformative side of the spectrum, my results will mostly focus on the transformative dimension of social change. Yet, social change practices and actions that seem transformative can have ameliorative components (Prilleltensky, 2014). Indeed, TN, a Queer Asian director of a non-profit care work

organization focusing on harm reduction and solidarity economies among other topics shared:

> I think letting go of that ideal vision and being really open to what's possible and to like a multitude of realities and possibilities is important, and I think a lot of that takes a lot of resources. It's certainly not linear and it requires us to create conditions where that's possible.

The transformative work shared by our participants is not linear and can take many forms. Some of the work might seem contradictory at times, as non-profits work within larger systems of oppression that delineate their programming and impact possibilities (Rappaport, 1981). Yet, much of the impactful work reported by these organizations was inspired by abolitionist visions of social change.

To better serve their communities in transformative ways, an abolitionist framework for social change was consistently observed through our participants' stories. EM is an abolitionist working in an organization that moves alongside the transformative side of the social change continuum. Specifically, she does reform non-reform work within systems to support incarcerated people and coordinate coalition work to lobby for the decriminalization of laws at the state-level. EM shared her definition of abolition work:

> Abolition, which for me is [...] actual policing and and prisons, but looking again at all of the systems that depend upon [...], it's like all the tentacles of what I would call like the prison industrial complex, the ways that power is hoarded, like the media fear mongers, [...] that have interdependent components that have resulted in where we are now and you can't just take out one of them. You have to look at all of the various interdependent forces that rely on the extreme oppression of one group of people for the hoarding purposes of another. It's like making a group of people non-competitive by literally putting them in a cage. [...] *There's a world [...] in abolition, [where] we're not relying on that same kind of dynamic between [...] the deserving, not deserving, powerful, not powerful, instead of an "either or," there's more of a*

"both and" you can have. We're making more, more room [...]. The world that I'm orienting towards is one where we don't respond to violence and harm with punishment, caging and policing, and that instead we're moving towards like self-determination, resilience, like people having the resources that they need to thrive.

EM depicted the prison industrial complex (PIC) which consists of prisons, policing, and the legal system. Yet, EM stressesed the PIC's tentacles are expansive and cover a wider array of institutions, corporations, and sites where carceral logics of punishment are reproduced ideologically. One of those EM named is the media. EM shared the fear-mongering that advances criminalizing narratives about certain groups of people (e.g., working poor, people of Color) to justify criminalizing laws that sustain the imprisonment of people. For example, criminalizing media portrayals of Latinx people bolstered support for bigoted laws that sought to impose a hostile environment for Latinx groups (Menjívar, 2016). In response, abolition seeks to disrupt the systemic barriers that accumulate forest resources into areas of abundance and scarcity, allowing more people to navigate freely through the forest, in order to flourish, and contribute to society. EM worked toward a world that does not respond to violence with more violence. Instead, she aimed to transform the circumstances that led violence to occur in the first place, often related to lack of access to resources in society or some groups hoarding resources. The world EM envisioned is aligned with the world many abolitionist organizations are co-creating (brown, 2017; Hayes & Kaba, 2023).

Abolition includes goals designed to create and dismantle oppressive systems (Gilmore, 2022). To co-create, one must first dismantle systems of harm, such as

prisons. Imprisonment is indeed harmful and violent to people (Alexander, 2020). JC is a formerly incarcerated person who is committed to collaborating in lobbying for decriminalizing laws and co-creating mutual aid networks of support for incarcerated people and their families. JC shared:

> I've been in prison. My Mama died the first year. My grandma died six months later. My father died 10 months later. *Everybody I love died in 16 months of my 60 month prison sentence. So prison to me is hell.* I don't have no fond memories. Nothing. OK, so the shame in which one walks out of prison with, no one could imagine. So my sole purpose, right in life, is to make sure that brother and sister in there now fuck that shame, man. This is a shady ass system that you got trapped. *I don't give a fuck what you did. You got trapped in this system, so you got to heal and get that heal and get back into me. The number one pathway to healing is helping somebody. If you're committed to walk out of the penitentiary and find a way to help somebody, that is the key.* So I would want everyone, especially in that academian space, to know. Listen, *the shame of incarceration is enough. You can't make no one feel worse. Get out of the way. Learn to help our community by helping our people reenter the community, right? That's what academia that needs to.* The shame is enough. I guarantee it.

JC confided how he lost most of his close family within months of his prison sentence. Without being able to grieve with family and friends, he turned his grief into action, developing critical consciousness to point out how systems of oppression entrap minoritized people. The systemic entrapment of BIPOC people by the carceral system is partly based on significant financial incentives of millions of taxpayer dollars into the expansion of the war on drugs, with bonuses tied to law enforcement agencies based on annual drug arrests quotas and investment in private prisons to sustain the imprisonment of people who are Black and Brown (Alexander, 2020; Gilmore, 2022). Similar to many people who face the dehumanizing conditions of the carceral system, JC experienced shame for his incarceration. Many people are shamed

by their imprisonment to take individual responsibility for actions sometimes taken to survive systemic oppressive conditions that are often dismissed by the free choice model of criminal behavior (Haney, 2020a). These oppressive conditions increase its chokehold on minoritized people after release through post-conviction penalties, such as the political disenfranchisement of formerly incercated people, which is evidence of how systems of entrapment continue (Austin, 2004). Yet, JC shared how people can heal from the dehumanization of imprisonment and systemic entrapment by helping others and contributing to their communities. JC called for academics to assist incarcerated people in reintegrating into society. Through his organizing work, JC turned his attention to collaborate with others to dismantle the systems of entrapment that affect communities of Color.

Envisioning a more just world through abolitionist means implies a consistency in the rejection of the carceral system to make people accountable for their actions (Gilmore, 2022; Hayes & Kaba, 2023). This consistency includes unsettling logics of punishment even when making actors within the carceral system such as police officers accountable for the harm they bring to others. Kelly is a Queer Native organizer, podcaster, and author. Kelly has been part of harm reduction and mutual aid collectives for decades. Originally inspired by her mom’s mutual aid work, Kelly is an experienced organizer from many campaigns with abolitionist demands. Kelly envisioned a better world from an abolitionist standpoint:

> I think in a better world than this one, we wouldn't be governed by capitalism or carceral logics. I can imagine a world in which we're free. And when people wrong each other or harm each other, our reactions aren't grounded in punishment. *I think a big part of what has us so messed up all the time in this*

> *culture is that we have been taught to equate satisfaction with justice when in reality a lot of things are satisfying that aren't actually just and don't actually bring us closer to justice or peace. And I think that keeping us fooled and kind of wanting and demanding the wrong things and kind of jumping through hoops like demanding, you know, convictions for killer cops, for example. It structurally changes nothing and we see that when on the very rare occasion that a police officer is punished for killing a person*, it doesn't actually change anything about the day-to-day experiences of Black folks, Native folks and other people who are perpetually victimized by police in this country. *So I think breaking out of those patterns for one and we would be living in a world where you know matters of justice were, were harder in some ways, right, because we wouldn't have these illusions to cling to. We would, we would be doing more of the hard work of figuring out what justice looks like together. We would be doing more of the work of striving to rebuild relationships and rebuild community relations in the wake of harm, and so in some ways you know there would be.* [...] You know we would have a recognition that we are all actually worthy of the means of survival and the means of of joy. And [...] of having some sort of collective relationship.

Kelly shared how carceral logics of punishment are connected to capitalism; to heal from the former means to unsettle seeking punishment as a form of justice. In Kelly’s telling, more violence and harm to people seldom bring justice or peace. Kelly was consistent and principled in their visions of a more just world outside carceral systems. Embodying their visions was exemplified by their statement that when killer cops are rarely held accountable through carceral systems, the harm they caused to people is not addressed. Rather, an abolitionist framework would often require reparations to victims, survivors, and their families as necessary to address harm (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020; Hayes & Kaba, 2023). Thus an abolitionist goal is to rebuild community relations as a means of collective survival. Kelly dreamed of systems that collectively return people who harmed and people who were harmed to a collective relationship as an effort to rebuild communities and heal from carceral systems, structurally and ideologically.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we noted social change practice and actions fall within the transformative-ameliorative change continuum (Kivell et al., 2023; Prilleltensky, 2014). One clear pathway to transformative work is abolition. Abolition allows reform non-reform work to reduce the harm carceral structures do to minoritized people while co-creating alternatives to address problems aiming for accountability and collective healing (Hayes & Kaba, 2023). Indeed, the social change work our participants engaged with is neither linear nor binary. The carceral structures that need to be abolished are part of the prison industrial complex, which includes prison, law enforcement agencies, and corporations that profit from the institutionalization and incarceration of minoritized people (Alexander, 2020; Gilmore, 2022). These complex system of harm act like parasitic fungi, infiltrating and entrapping minoritized people even after their release, with psychological consequences that include internalized shame (Austin, 2004). Yet, some incarcerated people turn that shame into action to collectively serve their communities.

Participants highlighted the need to address and heal from the harm caused by carceral systems that inflict pain and shame. They emphasized moving away from viewing seeking punishment as a form of justice, and instead focused on healing, aligning with the goals of abolitionist and restorative justice movements (brown, 2020; Hayes & Kaba, 2023). Often, punishment does not include reparations for victims and survivors of interpersonal harm. Thus to envision abolition, participants embody it through practices and actions. Participants' commitment to abolition as a

means to enact social change was a notable pattern within our results. Abolition has creative and dismantling components, many of which relate to unsettling a culture of punishment that often ideologically sustains carceral structures of harm (Gilmore, 2022). The creative aspect of abolition relates to co-creating a more generative culture of life-affirming practices.

Chapter 4: Tree Roots Internal Organizational Transformative Change Practices

Organizational transformative change practices are the roots of the social change we study in care work, non-profit, and organizing settings. Often, the social change that practitioners long for is co-created and tested through their organizing settings first. Indeed, these settings and collectives are the practice grounds for the liberated societies sprouting in the understory of the forest. Carceral institutions and ideologies often delineate what is deemed possible. In contrast, change-makers prune the harmful impact of oppressive ideologies, cultivating life-affirming ways of being and existing that center the well-being of people outside their exploitation or criminalization. Such social change practices reforest new groves with concrete alternatives for more just social dynamics, interrelations, and conditions of co-existence. According to our analysis, there are four root themes outlining internal organizational change practices: Rebellious values of care, embodied relationality, decision-making processes aiming for heterarchy, and accountability: refusing abandonment. Following, we explore each of these rooted practices based on our participants' stories of the embodiment of social change.

Rebellious Values of Care

In a neoliberal capitalistic society that relishes individual success and material self-profit with the goal of amassing wealth as means of survival, caring for one another as a value is a brave act of rebellion to the forced disposability of people and to the social isolation and alienation from community, which often act as control

mechanisms for the continuation of systemic harm. A population divided and detached from each other is easier to exploit and threaten into submission (i.e., alienation sustains exploitation; (Bronfenbrenner, 1980; Heinrich, 2012). Indeed, as we live and struggle under a system of neoliberalism that prizes hyperindividualism, the centering of care is a radical reorientation to the possibilities of collectivity and shared commitments to justice (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018). Rebellious values of care show that people are not disposable, recommitting to the understanding that collective liberation is bound to each other's liberation.

One way to promote collective liberation in organizing spaces is through aggreeing to community guidelines, which are determined based on guiding values. Indeed, setting and revisiting values is a common practice in abolitionist organizing (Kaba, 2021). Many participants pointed out intentional practices to set and operationalize values tied to community agreements. By coming back to dialogue about values and agreements, organizers and care workers supported fluid conversations to work through difference. SR is a Restorative Justice (RJ) circle facilitator from Colombian-American backgrounds. SR led the RJ team in her organization, using circle keeping to hold space for fluid and difficult conversations in team-building. SR said:

> I think fluidity is based on [...] an actual authentic interest in the human beings that are both in this work with us and very much opposed to the work that we're doing because it's, it's just, it's more effective that way. And um, and I- I think it's easier to sort of lean towards accepting differences because they actually lead to better strategizing on how to achieve those wins.
>
> *If we understand not just that somebody is different, but how they're different, why they're different, what is their lived experience that informs any*

> *differences between us and what is ours, we actually become better organizers and activists that way. So in that regard, fluidity to me just means being in relationship with each other, not just in the work* or against each other in the work.

Fluidity and working through difference are integral for the sustainability and vitality of the social change movement forest. Abolitionist organizing literature suggests that although movement work often involves sacrifice, these sacrifices are not equitably taken on by people (Hayes & Kaba, 2023). Such relational work aimed at asserting social justice values and challenging oppressive behaviors within organizing spaces is frequently gendered and racialized, with women and people of Color disproportionately bearing the burden of bridging these differences (Ellison & Langhout, 2020). SR tackled this issue by emphasizing the importance of fully recognizing people's humanity. This recognition involves expanding our understanding of differences through active, open-minded curiosity about how people's lived experiences are shaped by power, privilege, and oppression. Furthermore, embracing fluidity and difference may bring about more effective solutions and organizing strategies because people from different perspectives and backgrounds are welcomed into the space. Fluidity allows organizers to stay in relationship with each other, particularly when conflict arises. Fluidity implies a clear commitment and trust in people's ability to transform and navigate difference. Relatedly, EM shared:

> We spent a lot of time and conversations with people within the organization [...] to help us get clear about our values [...] [W]hat came forward were things like, interconnection [...] centering and naming Black liberation as a core value. We also talked a lot about the people most impacted by policing and prisons. [...] we'd also talked a lot about like culture of care. A lot of these

values really resonate with me [...] I think other ones are like self determination believing in people's abilities to transform, you know, being accountable that type of stuff...but I think like I think a lot about how to make abolition irresistible like, how do we make our work irresistible? And so that to me is about like joy, like helping people thrive [...] how do we lean into joy and have that be part of the revolutionary work?

EM mentioned values like "Black liberation" and centering people most affected by policing that relate directly to the goals and change-making practices of the organization. These social justice-oriented values also appear alongside values like creating a "culture of care" and "leaning into joy." These care-based values undergird the organizational work and tend to the needs of people and staff-members operating within these spaces. Rather than using a neoliberal model of the endlessly productive worker (Adams et al., 2019), this organization seems to view their staff holistically by acknowledging that they have needs and constantly revisiting values that serve to support them. Establishing this strong base of care and care-oriented values is rebellious in its resistance to capitalistic workplace ideals, but it also serves to redefine what it means to be a part of revolutionary work (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018). By rebelling against these systems from within, EM and their organization 'walked the talk' and embodied the transformative change they are trying to enact. They centered joy and made sure the work became "irresistible" to others, thus ensuring the sustainability of the movement (Bambara & Lewis, 2012; brown, 2017).

To rebel against carceral systems that benefit from our isolation means to center a shared responsibility for each other's wellbeing. Exemplifying a shared responsibility as a rebellious value of care, Kelly shared:

You know we would have a recognition that we are all actually worthy of the

> means of survival and the means of of joy. [...] Of having some sort of collective relationship where we care for each other, we would have a practice of reciprocal care in our communities. The idea of individual responsibility that you know that it's my fate I am ultimately responsible for. And I've got to pull myself up by my bootstraps or that, that nuclear family. Over there with those parents, they're responsible for that, to those children of theirs, and no one else. These are traps that keep us distracted. They keep us distracted from overcoming the oppression that we face. They also keep us distracted from the reality that life could be much easier in a lot of ways and much more bearable and much more joyful if we learned to actually depend on each other in the ways that it is in our nature. To depend on each other because we, we are social animals who have been stripped of our natural social relations. Of our sort of pack mentality to nurture and care for each other and collectivity, we've been robbed of that in so many ways. And so in, in a better world than this one, I think we would regain some of that and we would have more of a sense of collective responsibility and in that sense of collective responsibility, we would have more power. And we would have a better chance of making it.

Kelly rejected neoliberal conceptions of the entrepreneurial self (Adams et al., 2019) that places individual responsibility in the self and the nuclear family as sole vehicles to assert one's well-being. Rather, such reductionist breakage of the social fabric of society appear to be a distraction to collectively engage in liberation work to break the shackles of systemic oppression, a collective undertaking in its essence. By reclaiming a collective sense of shared responsibility, people can build more power and increase their chances of asserting their well-being as a community.

Research has highlighted the importance of discussing values in alignment with one's theory of change in women's rights organizations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Nicaragua, and participatory action research collaborations aiming for transformative change in the US (Brodsky et al., 2011; Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018; Langhout, 2015). Yet, these studies discussed values shaping programming or actions in the community. Few research studies have covered collectively establishing values

as an internal organizational practice, centering collective care within organizing and care worker settings (Kivell et al., 2023). Centering collective care within organizing and care work settings rebels against neoliberal pressures of individual success tied to isolation and alienation, which make people more easily exploited (Adams et al., 2019; Bronfenbrenner, 1980; Heinrich, 2012; Held, 2005). Rebellious values of care are based on participants' commitment to have difficult and continuous conversations about setting values and community agreements. Participants within collectives and organizations aiming for transformative change embraced fluidity and working through differences, as handling diverse perspectives generatively is key to addressing problems. Many participants centered the most marginalized communities as a core value guiding their work. In doing so, they rebel against neoliberal ideologies prioritizing individual achievement rather than collective liberation (Adams et al., 2019; Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018). Rebellious values of care are grounded in a deep shared responsibility for each other's well-being, which many participants feel and act upon. Thus, care is centered as a relational value toward the embodiment of change within settings that act upon the social justice values many organizations are committed to advancing.

Relational Embodiment of Care

Embodied relationality is an ethical stance and set of practices that prioritize the holistic well-being and development of people, in this case care workers, by fertilizing the social movement forest with care nutrients rooted below the ground of organizing change practices. Relationality expands care from the individual to the

collective, unsettling the binary person/group by embodying care in holistic ways (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018). Embodying relationality builds up on a rebellious culture of care, emphasizing shared responsibility for people within an organizing setting. This involves taking deliberate and concrete actions to foster social support and sustainable growth through actualizing rebellious values of care (Hayes & Kaba, 2023). By embodying care, relationality centers relationships as the practice ground of liberating spaces.

One relational embodiment of care was exemplified in our participants' interviews through an organizational practice of healing circles. TN is a non-binary Asian person who was actively engaged in organizing in college, where they saw the isolation and consequent burnout many activists experience. TN works in an organization that offers healing circles supporting community members to address conflict/harm as alternatives to calling the police that often ends up with more harm to racialized communities. Although care workers in TN's organization facilitate circles for the community, they also hold circles for their own colleagues to model care practices inside their organizing settings. The circle has a check-in opening where people can share how they are doing, how they feel about their work, ask for any support they need from others, and raise issues/conflicts that may need to be addressed as a community. TN shared:

> I think it's really important to get to know who the f*ck you're working with, you know [...], what we're bringing and ways in which and the needs that we have in our work [...]. And I also think that we're in this place where organizers and like care workers and social justice movements are ill, isolated, have like a deep lack of emotional and spiritual support and it weakens entire movements and so the ways in which we practice it is like we circle up

> amongst ourselves. [O]ne of the first things that we do is we train each and every staff member… [it] doesn't matter what you work on, if you work on operations and finance, you're going to know how to be a circle keeper, you know, like so we train everybody to be able to circle is one practice to be able to be a container for each other and to facilitate opportunities to get to know each other and where we come from and what we need. We do that between our staff. We do that with our interns. We do that with our member leaders. We do that with our allies that we are coalescing with and may have some conflict with, and we do it with our board as well, so. That is a really core tenet in practice of our work, and we also make room periodically. I would say like once every other month where we spend a whole day just having fun together. Like next month, we're going to [Beach town] [...], after that, we're going to go back to [Beach town] and we're going to go whale watching, like to really experience wonder and joy and pleasure and to connect in an unstructured way so that we can, like, nourish ourselves and each other in the process of doing pretty intense work.

TN shares embodied relationality practices through circles. Organizing spaces can be a counter to capitalistic work places where productivity is centered, instead of valuing people holistically in what they bring to the organizing setting. Neoliberal expectations of productivity may be beneficial on meeting short-term profit goals, yet they displace centering relationships, which is generative for building in community (Adams et al., 2019). Even though healing circles are often used in communities to address harm and conflict (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020), in TN's organization, everyone learns to hold and be in circles, regardless of their role. Circles become the nutrients that flow through the internal organizational roots nurturing support and connection between care workers (Kaba, 2021). Incorporating such circle practices holds emotional space for all workers, recognizing their full humanity and addressing their needs. Yet, it also allows coworkers to bond and connect beyond work. According to our interviews, circles act not just as a space for conflict mediation, but rather can act as relational spaces used to get to know one's

coworkers, including people at all levels, transgressing hierarchies. Circle keeping as a relational practice values team members' lives holistically, recognizing people's complete personhoods. This approach may address the lack of emotional support mentioned by TN, which sustains transformative work within the understory of movements. Centering relationality is essential to foster caring relationships. Circles co-create a setting where people can feel comfortable speaking up about their circumstances, helping the team move forward to accomplish their transformative change goals.

Joy and nourishment among coworkers is also emphasized. The cultivation of joy helps care workers survive and collectively rebel against oppressive circumstances and environments (Hayes & Kaba, 2023). Reclaiming joy from the margins as a collective organizational practice, such as having a monthly care workers trip, challenges white supremacist, patriarchal, and neoliberal standards of seeking joy for individual pleasure (Player et al., 2020). Care workers co-create joy practices to sustain and carry out intense work within the community. Relational practices such as circle keeping or collective joy through low-stakes staff trips allow people to embody rebellious values of care and sustain themselves while doing transformative change work.

To embody transformative change within internal organizational practices, care workers instill and embody a culture of care and collaboration. Previous research has noted the co-optation of care by putting the burden of care in the individual through self-care practices (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018). Yet, care can be embodied

within transformative change settings in concrete, collaborative, and celebratory ways. SR is a circle facilitator in a restorative justice organization, a second-generation immigrant, and a Latina organizer. SR noted:

> We do almost every project in teams and so there is always an interest in what does workload distribution look like and when something needs to come off a plate, there's very little reluctance to speak up and say, hey, I have too much on my plate and there's very, very little reluctance on our team from folks to say, OK, I'll take it.
>
> You know [...] really realistic conversations around work, distribution and workload [...] are really, really important. Care to us is also having [...] check-ins with supervisors [...] every two weeks, and there's always a question there around care. How are you taking care of yourself? How can I support in your care? How can the team support in your care? So, really like shared responsibility. Which I think leads to a much lower level of competition. Our team is an incredibly humble team with very little inner turmoil [...]. Anything that we achieve we see as an achievement of the collective. It's very rare for somebody to go, “I did this, this is my project.” [...]
>
> And that ties to constant celebration. So, something that I really encourage is in our team meetings, in our conversations with site partners is to start off with wins. You know what? What's one win that you've had in the last two weeks? And that could be big or small, because I think that we often see more burnout happen when we're really [...] eye on the ball. Here's the big win [...]. I've had a really long week and I got this e-mail out [...] I have been struggling with phrasing, but I actually sent it today. Most places would be like “OK, but is that it? Is that all you did?” Instead, “OK, if that's your win, then let's all celebrate the win!” So constant conversations around wins, big or small, for an individual level, because I think again like collective power is really beautiful and collective power is increased when people are seen [...] celebrated and acknowledged and honored for their own contributions [...].
>
> Our team, you know, we have something that I introduced to the team a couple of years ago called Dream Fridays, and so every other Friday our entire team comes together to dream together as a collective, and it's every conversation is on a topic, and it's anything that you want. And we at the end sort of try to tie it back to our work and we have had dream Fridays on psychedelics on, you know, prison abolition, obviously, but also on poetry. We've had it on music. We've had it on sexual expression. And so dreaming together I think is a form of collective care [...].

> I would say that this team is a is a very, very celebratory and joy-focused team because we know that the work we're doing is so important and is so hard that finding the joy in it, the celebration and the triumphant it on a quotidian level, is of the utmost importance for us to keep going and be as good as we can be.

Collective care practices are instilled by nurturing a collaborative culture that encourages honest conversations about workload and encourages positive feedback to people's work, while unsettling the binary between self and collective care (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018). A shared responsibility value is embodied by posing thoughtful questions about the support care workers need from team members. Moving from a competitive to a collaborative culture means centering collaborative achievements, by celebrating big and small individual wins collectively. Social problems can often have an overwhelming scale, which can inhibit addressing them. Care workers can be more effective at tackling social problems in transformative ways, by breaking down issues in smaller manageable tasks and actions to better focus movements efforts and resources and build momentum (Weick, 1984). Honoring people's contributions, while co-creating a support network to ensure co-workers well-being is considered becomes a transformative practice to embody a caring culture. Having a collaborative and celebratory culture allows a concrete practice of freedom dreaming. Robin D. G. Kelley (2022), a Black liberation scholar, states "collective social movements are incubators of new knowledge" (p. 8). As such, a collective care practice of dreaming together as a team, allowing care workers to make connections between the broader abolitionist movements, artistic expression reimagining fairer worlds, and encourage their best selves in the transformative work in which they engage.

Dreaming and acting toward fairer worlds assert that abolition centers presence and co-creating, rather than absence or solely dismantling (Gilmore, 2022). By centering relationality, power can be built within care work communities and organizing spaces. Abolition in action means to work across difference in co-creating a world where life is precious, life is precious (Gilmore, 2022). Kelly, a Native organizer and author mentioned earlier, pointed out:

> You know Ruth Wilson Gilmore says that life is precious. And I think that is a deeply important aspect of any organizing space that I work in. *Is life precious here? And I mean that in the sense of are we conditioning ourselves and each other and then understanding that this is a project of collective survival that our lives and well-being matter here in a way that they don't under capitalism and carceral system? And that is essential to abolition. There is no abolition without that, and to me it's a sacred principle* [...]. And I bring that to bear anywhere that I'm at. I don't trust any space where I don't think that that idea is at work. *Because if we are not more precious within the organizing space than we are out in the world under capitalist and white supremacist norms, then we're not really breaking any patterns. We're not really breaking away from that which is killing us. And we're not going to have anything that's sacred enough to us to defend it when the going gets tough* [...]. Abolition is a process of unlearning and learning and of forming the relationships that help us truly understand what we need to understand in order to get free. That's something that only happens through shared struggle. You know you can't just walk up to someone and say here your politics are bad. You see instead, like we need to experience through a genuine commitment to shared survival, to [be in] solidarity, to working together in collectivity.

Affirming and actualizing through organizing work that life is indeed precious is, in essence, a relational embodiment of care as an internal organizational practice (Gilmore, 2022). Kelly juxtaposes embodying care practices to carceral logics where the well-being of people, especially the most minoritized, is not asserted. For transformative work settings to challenge, upset, and replace carceral patterns of abandonment fed by capitalist and white supremacist norms, an organizing space

must center relationships through shared struggle. The movements and the communities said movements intend to serve have interconnected commitments to their shared survival (Hayes & Kaba, 2023). If life is precious and people's well-being is centered, relational acts of care particularly when it is difficult to care for a group's members, can become the lifeline to ensure an alternative to current societal pressures that dehumanizes people and ideologically sustain the precarity of life. A core relational practice asserting the sanctity of life may open up ideological barriers toward the unmaking of injustice and the remaking of fairer worlds.

Relationality is a somewhat nascent topic of study in social psychological research of organizing (Christens, 2012; Ellison & Langhout, 2020). Our analysis, bridging relationality with the embodiment of rebellious values of care in organizing and care settings, expands the study of these intersections, adding to recently published literature on the topic (Ellison & Langhout, 2022). A relational embodiment of care actualizes a shared responsibility as a rebellious value through healing circles, a common practice to address harm (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020). Such care practices redirect organizational efforts from sole neoliberal productivity in meeting tasks to centering relationships in communities of care (Adams et al., 2019). Yet, circles allow more than opportunities to address harm; they also ensure spaces for people to speak up about personal hurdles, particularly when managing workloads while considering care workers' wellbeing. By allowing spaces where people's humanity is asserted, joy is recentered from the margins as a collective endeavor to sustain the difficult work that needs to be done in the

community (Player et al., 2020). Joy and collective celebration become ways to sustain movements, including concrete practices to co-create spaces of freedom dreaming, which inspire and sustain transformative work (Kelley, 2022). Freedom dreaming can be actualized through the embodiment of core principles in abolitionist organizing, the most sacred one asserting that life must be precious within liberated spaces in ways that it is not in a society shaped by carceral systems and logics of punishment and harm (Gilmore, 2022). Thus, people's well-being is asserted and relationships are centered through the embodiment of care practices. To center relationships and ensure the likelihood of freedom dreams in becoming a possibility, equitable decision-making practices must be nurtured.

Decision-making Processes Aiming for Heterarchy

Decision-making processes are some of the vital nutrients drawn up from the roots sustaining the forest's trees. These processes ensure the health and growth of the entire forest by asserting life is indeed precious. Based in this thinking, many abolitionist organizers and care workers in our sample unsettled power differentials and top-down approaches to make decisions by aiming for heterarchy. Heterarchy is an organizational process that aims for "mutuality, interdependence, and power sharing" (Tebes & Thai, 2018, p.10). Heterarchies depart from hierarchical structures that tend to have fixed borders, decentralizing decision-making power, roles, and tasks within organizing settings (Gallegos-Riofrío et al., 2021). As such, heterarchies have the potential to foster shared leadership and healthy accountability mechanisms (Tebes & Thai, 2018). Shared leadership and roles may ensure decisions align with

organizational goals, centering transparency and instilling processes that gain the consent of care workers, while making space for minoritized perspectives shaping transformative work.

Heterarchies shaping decision-making can be facilitated through restorative justice circles. RJ is a Black care worker with a decade of experience in restorative justice work with impacted youth in schools. RJ framed his restorative justice work as embracing humanity to unsettle carceral systems and punitive cultures that traumatized people. He centered compassion and (re)building relationships through his work. RJ's restorative justice work is often tied to circles and his organization uses circles not only to address conflict, but to ensure heterarchical decision-making. RJ shared:

> I mean obviously in the organization you would have a[n] Executive Director or CEO. [...] But there's also [...] [an] approach that is definitely different from any corporate world [...]. Like, we allow everybody to have an opinion or, be able to voice their opinion and share their thoughts and give insight, from their perspective and-and even in a circle. The circle was not ran by anybody, right? [...] When you sit in a circle, there is no hierarchy because you're literally facing everyone. Like, we're shoulder to shoulder. There's no lines, there's no boxes, there's no corners. There's nobody above anyone else. We're all in the circle. So there's nobody behind anyone, and there's no one in front of everyone. We're all in this together, and I think that's just symbolic of just the way we do things [...] like, we do everything in consensus. [...] We come to an agreement. We compromise. We think about what it is and that's how we do it, this is the way we'll make decisions moving forward. Like, we'll ask, we'll put it out there and then everybody just gets their perspective on it and then we come to a conclusion. "OK, this makes sense. Let's move forward [...] this is how we'll do it." [...]. This is how we're going to show up for one another. This is this is something that where we all can feel supported and-and heard and seen and respected.

RJ acknowledged that he works within a hierarchical structure with a CEO and

someone who has the final say in a decision. Yet heterarchical organizational practices are fluid and may work even within hierarchical structures (Gallegos-Riofrío et al., 2021; Tebes & Thai, 2018). For example, RJ's team aims to incorporate heterarchical practices such as circles intended to encourage every team member to voice their opinions. Seeing their opinions influence decision-making becomes a matter of showing up with each other in circle, feeling respected and being heard. By fostering honest and transparent conversations about decisions affecting the group, care workers can establish agency within their organizing spaces. Circle practices aiming for heterarchy may unsettle hierarchies as care workers share their expertise and come to an agreement. In order for people to do transformative work unsettling hierarchies outside and within organizations, conversations about values are essential (Langhout, 2012; Sarason, 1972). In order for circles to unsettle power differentials and move the group closer to heterarchy, values embodying mutual respect, fostering agency, and instilling care were embodied. By encouraging collective decision-making in conversation with organizational values, organizations might more likely meet their goals.

Decision-making practices can support care workers in meeting organizational goals by being true to and asserting their values. When internal organizational practices match their external community impact goals while attending to organizational values, care workers can embody and co-create the fairer worlds they work toward. SR is an organizer with restorative justice facilitation skills that she uses to promote healing and transformative change. Although SR's organization is

not abolitionist with a more ameliorative mission, SR's Restorative Justice programming team is abolitionist. SR confided:

> We have had really open conversations about our own grants, and so most nonprofit organizations will have those grant decisions live purely at the executive leadership level, with development folks in the conversation. Very rarely will you see grant decisions being made by a team itself. So [...] if there's a grant that exists, that looks good, our team will have a whole conversation around it. If we were to pursue this grant, would this be aligned with our values? How does this align with our work as a whole? Is this actually moving us in our mission to again contribute to prison abolition to uh- disempower systems to build community power, so on and so forth. So I think that that's a good example of something that is not commonly done, which is before we go out and get this money, even knowing that we need it because we need it right, we're nonprofit, let's talk about this as a team and see if the alignment is there versus a very top-down decision of "we got this grant, here's the project, here are the deliverables. Let me assign you to do this work."

SR points out that while decision-making around seeking grants often lives exclusively in management level leadership, her team does have conversations about pursuing funding. In these conversations, the team reflects on if the grant is aligned with their values and organizational goals. SR's team discussed if the grant would advance their abolitionist mission to build community power and unsettle systems. Securing grants that are aligned with organizational transformative goals ensures the deliverables do not distract resources and human power from dismantling oppressive systems. Indeed, grant funders impose restrictions on programming by setting deliverables that tend to focus on individual solutions rather than addressing the systemic causes of social problems (e.g., toxic masculinity and sexist violence in domestic violence), effectively limiting the transformative impact of non-profits' work in the community (Finley & Esposito, 2012). In contrast, evidence suggest that

when unrestricted grants were provided to 21 non-profit organizations, all of them used the grant funding to scale up and strengthen their programs and services (Fleming et al., 2023). Thus facilitating grant-seeking dialogues among care workers across various organizational sectors - like programming and fundraising teams - could advance a transformative mission, potentially enhancing the ability of care work organizations to better serve communities. By ensuring the programming team consents to funding decisions, care workers in charge of delivering programs enjoy a sense of agency and shared decision-making.

Consensus is an important tool in transformative decision-making practices. Consensus is practiced in nuanced ways within organizations, promoting dialogue but not requiring total agreement to move forward with a decision. Rather, organizers adapted modified consensus decision-making structures to help them meet transformative goals. One possible modification is the spokes council approach which Fatima mentions in her interview. Fatima is a working-class Muslim white mediator who was a bottom-liner in an immigrant justice solidarity collective. Fatima's organizing group sprung up to address Immigrations Custom Enforcement (ICE) raids in a central coast California town. Her collective held a hotline to report ICE raids and police harassment to immigrant and Latinx communities and bystander trainings for community members to do legal observations to make ICE accountable. Fatima shared:

> So, in the beginning we had a spokes council structure where like different working groups, like let's say there's the [what] we called the tech and logistics crew or TLC. So, they were the group that did like the phone system and you know, stuff that was more logistical and then we had, you know, a

> Trainings Group that organized trainings. We had a coordination group, that [...] arranged meetings, made sure that we had took care of the agendas, helped coordinate between working groups and stuff like that. So, we had a bunch of different working groups. And what we did was when we had to make decisions that were whole group decisions rather than, just within working groups we would basically give each working group a voice [spokes]. So, it was like it's not that anyone could say something. It wasn't like you're not allowed to say something, but we [...] in terms of who could say yes to a decision, or stand aside or no to a decision was a working group. So, if one person in the working group wasn't on board, they would kind of have to get their working group to see their reasoning and usually and that was helpful because no one was ever alone in expressing dissent.

Fatima discussed how the spokes council structure established several working groups such as having one in charge of the ICE raid report hotline and another responsible for bystander trainings, all connected through a coordination group that took care of the collective's agendas. When making collective decisions that affected the whole group, each working group in this organization would select a spokes person who would be in charge of communicating their group's decision. This process allowed people to express dissent within smaller groups, fostering more in-depth dialogue before shaping the broader group's stance in the broader level of decision-making. Spokes councils, as seen in the Occupy Wall Street movement and other organizing spaces, have historically served this purpose by facilitating broader decision-making processes (Savio, 2015). Fatima highlighted how, within her group, when a single person expressed dissent, the group would engage in discussion of their reasoning before making a decision on the topic. Fatima reflected on the value of spokes councils in large groups, where meaningful dialogue can be challenging due to the number of participants and their multiple organizational roles. The spokes council aim is to decentralize decision-making, allowing smaller, autonomous groups

handling consensus decision-making practices. This method has the potential to enhance inclusiveness of minoritized perspectives into the decision-making process. Although spokes councils may effectively ensure shared decision-making practices, power differentials can shape conversations in smaller working groups.

Top-down hierarchical decision making structures often reproduce power differentials and oppressive dynamics in organizing spaces. Indeed, hierarchical practices reproduce social inequities and were experienced as disempowering in organizing settings (Sutherland et al., 2014). Depowerment - defined in the literature review - has been effective in community psychology interventions aiming to address inequities (Huygens, 1997; Riemer et al., 2020). Participants have shared that moving organizations from hierarchical top down models to non-hierarchical shared leadership models may center minoritized people's perspectival knowledge such as BIPOC, Queer, and Trans people. The benefits are twofold: by pairing more experienced and most likely positionally privileged mentors in established leadership roles with minoritized and emergent leaders, both institutional expertise and creative new ideas can cultivate out-of-the-box approaches to address issues and unsettle power dynamics of leadership. Shared leadership models are a tangible example of depowerment in decision-making. Depowerment might involve relinquishing some decision-making privileges to allow minoritized care workers in positions of systemic disadvantage to shape programs that serve minoritized communities (Huygens, 1997; Prilleltensky, 2008; Riemer et al., 2020). EM is a white Queer woman non-profit

director who has been in different leadership positions in her organization. While engaging in a process toward shared leadership, EM shares:

> Recently I became a co-director of programs. And a person that had been working under me, we have shifted to be co-directors and he is formerly incarcerated. He's a Black man. And we had been working together for a long time. [...] There was a lot of ways in which we have to do a lot of work to move into working more in a shared power model, while recognizing that part of what makes us really strong is that we're different and that we have different skills and then it's not like one set of those skills is better. But [...] to me, that was about really pushing for him to get paid more, for him to get support and leadership training, and for there to be an investment in that kind of power redistribution for both of us. I feel like that's a concrete, like recent, power sharing [process], where I don't feel like [...] I lost power. I maybe lost like top dog of my department, but that was never like how I ran my team anyway [...] I went from like running our policy team, now J and I run all our programmatic work, we have run that [...] fairly oriented towards naming power [and] privilege while [also] breaking down power and privilege. So like trying to have flat structures where we can and but also [...] building some of that interdependent stuff. So, one of the ways [...] we do that is we have this section on our program team meetings that we call "Show and Learn" where [...] some people know how to do things and other people don't and [...] we don't want it to just be that [...] if only EM knows how to do it, that's a way that I can hoard power. But if EM is sick, we might need other people to know how to do it, so then we just started doing these things called "Show and Learn" where we would like teach each other stuff. [...] J had this brilliant program that we've launched, that's about where we pay people in prison to work on our team. And that is like unheard of. So, we have two fellows on our team that are currently incarcerated. We have a fellow on our team who's formally incarcerated, and then we have two fellows who are now staff who were formerly fellows [...] It's like [...] creating pathways into the organization that build people's political power and skills and, and our investment in them.

EM shares a concrete depowerment process that shaped decision-making in her team. Depowerment is a concrete practice that aims for heterarchy, as it seeks to decenter positional privilege in organizational leadership (Huygens, 1997). A decentering privilege process might foster shared roles and increased agency for minoritized people in shaping decision-making (Gallegos-Riofrío et al., 2021). EM's

organization has created fellowships for people who are currently incarcerated so they can be compensated for their time working for the organization, often as consultants. As a formerly incarcerated Black man, J brings his expertise in navigating carceral systems of harm to EM's leadership experience. By sharing a co-director role responsible for all programmatic work, while ensuring J is compensated in equitable ways and receives the leadership training and support to thrive, EM does not see the shift in power as a loss but as a step forward unsettling power and privilege and moving toward embodying shared decision-making. Moreover, J’s expertise is leveraged by yet another concrete process of “show and learn” that allows co-worker to share their skills and build their capacities to the collective benefit of the group and their transformative work. J leveraged the “show and learn” practice to successfully propose a program that employs people who are incarcerated as fellows, some of whom will transition to an in-person role once they are released. Both a shared leadership practice as depowerment and “show and learn” as skill-building allows the organization to ensure reinvesting on people formerly incarcerated, leveraging their expertise and building political power, ensuring they shape programs that serve people who have gone through similar experiences.

Decision-making processes discerned in our analysis of interviews with abolitionist organizers and care workers aimed for heterarchies by utilizing several transformative approaches. Circles are a transformative practice that implement heterarchy in decision-making by valuing the insights of care workers’ not currently occupying leadership roles. This approach enhances their sense of agency and

integrates crucial expertise from programming teams, who are often more attuned to community needs than formal leadership. Although, there is research on healing circles to support students' political actions (Chavez-Diaz & Lee, 2015; Ginwright, 2015), there is not much research on how circles can facilitate decision-making in organizing settings, unsettle hierarchies, and ensure care workers within a circle can voice their perspective while discussing a decision. Participants' perspectives shaped discussions on whether seeking certain grants would advance the organizations' transformative goals. Adding to evidence that suggests when non-profits can access unrestricted grants they most often use it to better serve communities through programming (Fleming et al., 2023), our results suggest that some organizations ensure their funding is aligned with their values and liberatory goals unsettling unfair systems. To ensure liberatory goals are met, decision-making processes need to facilitate generative dialogue in organizing spaces.

One effective approach to facilitate communication discerned from our interviews are spokes councils, which are structures for collective decision-making and information circulation in large autonomous groups such as Occupy Wallstreet (Savio, 2015). From our interviews, spokes councils were especially effective to co-create spaces of dissent in small working groups that would ensure decentralizing decision-making. Yet, dissent is sometimes silenced when power differentials are not addressed in decision-making. Depowerment is an effective approach to unsettle hierarchical decision-making that tends to allow hoarding power and decision-making in a privileged few (Huygens, 1997; Riemer et al., 2020). Through a shared model of

co-directorship leadership, pairing a more experienced and most likely privileged person with a person with deep perspectival and experiential knowledge navigating systems of harm, care workers may ensure people most impacted by systems shape programs meant to serve their communities. Instilling skill-sharing processes such as "show and learn," organizations may encourage nurturing competences in low stakes environments, allowing care workers to gain insights to be more effective at their work. Decision-making processes aiming for heterarchy, as discussed in this section, provide approaches to make decisions that sustain a culture of care. Fostering heterarchical decision-making practices requires robust mechanisms that promote accountability to address conflict and ensure leadership is accountable to care workers' liberatory commitments.

Accountability: Refusing abandonment

Accountability practices within organizing spaces facilitate mechanisms to address conflict and contest the systemic abandonment of minoritized people, which functions at different levels of analysis. Organized abandonment includes institutional means to uphold an oppressive social order by intentionally reducing access to resources such as affordable housing and healthcare, living wage jobs, and a safety net creating voids in addressing community needs for corporate profit (Gilmore, 2007). This institutional abandonment of people redirects state funds from social services to invest in carceral systems and criminalizes racialized and working poor people (Gilmore, 2022). Through an ideological internalization, organized abandonment results in indifference toward minoritized communities experiencing

harm from carceral systems. For instance, imprisoned people often experience isolation from their families and friends during and after incarceration (Riley et al., 2024). Organized abandonment is also internalized within organizing communities when oppressive behaviors are not addressed in generative ways. When ruptures occur within organizations, some people are left behind, damaging organizing efforts and the embodiment of rebellious values of care (Begley, 2021; Hayes & Kaba, 2023). Thus accountability was conceptualized by some of our participants as a commitment to refuse to abandon each other to punitive logics used to address conflict, as reproduced by the carceral state. In contrast, accountability mechanisms that embody care and interconnectedness are key to the survival of our participants' transformative organizing efforts.

Accountability processes can include rejecting internalized and systemic abandonment of minoritized people by unsettling the ideological police within our minds and hearts. Rather than relying on carceral and punishment-oriented forms to resolve conflict, transformative systems of accountability focus on nurturing caring relationships and interdependence in abolitionist spaces. Amina is an Asian Muslim scholar-activist and abolitionist organizer. Her organizing work focuses on supporting people impacted by the carceral system. Amina reflects on how important systems of accountability are in organizing spaces:

> One of the things that we've been really trying to exercise within the group itself is, what does it mean to be abolitionist in our interpersonal work with each other, right? You know, in our own relations? And I've been thinking about that in that space and in every space, right, because this society trains us to be like carceral and punishment orient- like minded, right? We police each other, you know, we, uh, look for punishment as a form of justice. And like

> doing this work has really enabled me to like break that, um, in ways that I really like, am grateful for.

Amina highlights how interpersonal work within abolitionist organizing spaces must break free from carceral mindsets that place punishment as a form of justice. In doing so, abolitionist activists co-create settings where they embody punishment-free worlds to hold people accountable with the belief that, given the appropriate support and conditions, they can reach their full potential, rather than disciplining people for their worst actions. Participants shared that it was personally and organizationally beneficial for the sustainability of their work to dispel punitive notions of harm deserving retaliation. Punitive systems and ideologies often put people on the defensive, under the very real fear of disproportionate punishment many minoritized people face in carceral systems. This fear does not often lead to a true accounting of the harm done and healing (Hayes & Kaba, 2023). Kelly shares:

> I think many of us have had those kinds of experiences where we're used to, if we feel like we've taken the blame for something, it's going to be ugly for us. And so we need to work to undo some of those understandings in the first place, where we need conditions where we can acknowledge I made a mistake. *I know I made a mistake. And I want to do things differently. How can I one make amends for the mistake and then also change my practices or change the conditions so that I don't replicate this harm again?*. That's culture work […]. There is the "In it together toolkit," I think [it] is one of the best resources around this that is out there right now. Because you really need to have a group practice around how we communicate about harm, *how we communicate about about conflict. You know how we name these things? What are our assumptions? What are the common sources of conflict in our group? You know, how do we diagnose the problem? And from there, how do we create a container for resolving a conflict? What are our tools? Who are the practitioners that can help us when we don't know how to work our way through a problem?*. A lot of groups proceed without ever asking any of these questions. [...] To maintain our investment in one another and in the work, we have to have established agreements and understandings about how we communicate about how we redress harm when it happens. And if those

> agreements aren't in place, then what winds up happening is our punitive impulses take over and you get these kind of prosecutorial moments where it's kind of about speech making and someone who feels harmed kind of winning the room. And in those dynamics, the larger group is always going to lose.

Shared abolitionist values and goals in care work settings might not be enough. To prevent and address conflict, it is also necessary to co-create mechanisms for healthy conflict (Langhout, 2012; Sarason, 1972). Kelly points out a reactive stance some people have to admitting they are at fault as a consequence of experiencing disproportionate punitive measures. Yet, by moving away from punitive mechanisms to healing ones, people can be given space to acknowledge and address their mistakes by living in conditions that make sure harm is not replicated. Kelly points out the effectiveness of the "In it together toolkit" alternative practices (Interrupting Criminalization & Research In Action, 2023) to move past conflict. The participant's questions are shaped by the toolkit, identifying underlying assumptions that shape common sources of conflict and nurture collective tools to move past it, asking for outside help when needed. By using this process organizers can reach collective agreements to redress harm. Kelly points out that by rejecting prosecuterial moments of winning over a group to punish an offender can avoid the group losing trust as a collective.

Organizing groups can lose much by experiencing a cultural breakdown when white supremacy culture is not unsettled and addressed. By asking questions on how white supremacy culture shapes group dynamics, collectives can engage in difficult accountability processes to unsettle oppressive work dynamics. LMA is a mixed-race Native Queer abolitionist consultant with much experience in long-standing

abolitionist organizations. Her work now focuses on unsettling white supremacy culture within social justice organizations. LMA shared two examples of such processes. The first example occurred after people of Color engaged in difficult accountability conversations with white leadership, who by refusing to fully address the issues stemming from white supremacy culture and white fragility, ultimately led to the group disbandment. This failed process emphasizes the need to maintain an equitable organizational culture that fosters feedback loops to address systemic oppression within the organization, particularly after experiencing an organizational breakdown related to systemic racism. LMA shared an accountability process that was more successful:

> Another organization that I was a part of in terms of a transformative process, often it- it involves white supremacy culture. That's like, so at the root of a lot of my accountability work with organizations is getting called in by people of Color to support them fighting against white supremacy culture. And so this other group that I'm thinking about is an international group. And historically white, historically middle class, historically cis, and there was many years of disruption, frustration, arguments and fights of people of Color, Brown and Black people really feeling invisibilized in the organization's work, and feeling like their work was being stolen or their work was being co-opted. And so then *there was an intentional process or disruption around accountability with white supremacy culture that started with doing some political education and then moved into accountability processes*. And so like confronting individuals, *having circle processes around different incidences that had happened*, *building and advisory committee of mostly marginalized people within this larger organization*. And then slowly over time, *building up leadership of Brown and Black people to then take over the executive leadership of the organization.* And so now that organization is like Black-led, their mission has transformed. They have transformed their approach. They're leading their industry in this like radical social justice work, like [...] it's been really powerful. That process has been more of a like seven year process of watching that transition happen. And so parts of it felt really conflictual in the beginning. And it required some version of like conflicts management or conflict resolution and- and circle processes and accountability, and that included coaching and one-on-ones. You know conversations with people or

> having white people come for their white people. [...] *At the end of seven years we dissolved our Advisory Board because there was no need for it anymore. Enough marginalized people were in leadership that it didn't feel like we had to have a watch group holding vigilance around what was happening and instead now they are able to like lead their sector of the movement in thinking about and addressing white supremacy culture and addressing the negative impacts of white supremacy and white people and leadership in their- in their sector.* So those are like two examples like one where dissolution was necessary and one where it was a total transformation of leadership. And it took many years. But now like they're sort of on a different trajectory.

In this example, LMA helped facilitate an intentional accountability process to engage the organization's members with political education around white supremacy culture. The participant facilitated circles and one-on-ones to manage conflicts, created an advisory committee to ensure the organization adhered to its social justice values, and co-created conditions to build BIPOC leadership. The circle process was particularly important to confront tensions that stemmed from a larger systemic problem of white supremacy culture within the organization. By holding circles in ways that unsettled power differentials and provided space for minoritized care workers to share their perspectives on ongoing conflicts, people of Color empowered themselves to demand resolution and accountability from people within the organization. Explaining their accountability process in another segment of the interview, LMA shared that it stemmed away from shaming or punishment, saying it was "about like asking questions and, and bringing people into the conversation to lean in." Thus their accountability process was not punitive, but centered curiosity, processing how supremacy culture shaped conflict and harm.

Minoritized people within the organization shared their work was being co-opted. By co-creating conditions ensuring that more Black and Brown people took over more responsibilities, a shift occurred in the organization's mission. Other studies have highlighted how relational labor addressing conflict within organized spaces is gendered and racialized (Ellison & Langhout, 2020). Similarly, minoritized people's relational labor in LMA's telling fostered a setting where people could call each other in, particularly around issues of racism and white supremacy culture. The consulting support offered by LMA, including circle facilitation and one-on-one coaching, supported members individually and interpersonally to move past conflict. After seven years the organization had transformed itself enough to not require the advisory board. Indeed, co-creating accountability mechanisms from leaders to care workers helps to co-create organizations that live up to their social justice values. Accountability practices can ensure individuals or groups are held responsible for their actions and decisions within their organizing communities, centering justice, consent, and feedback loops. Establishing effective accountability mechanisms is essential for ensuring a caring and effective organizational culture within. Such mechanisms can ensure accountability from leaders to co-workers, countering neoliberal conceptions of top-down leadership based on individualism and the entrepreneurial self (Adams et al., 2019). Kelly has organized with several abolitionist collectives, one of which was the focus of their story. Assuming positions of leadership often against their inclinations, Kelly showed a reflexive understanding

of their power, co-creating leadership accountability questions to ensure they are accountable to their collective,

> I have this thing called a leadership inquiry. It's a, it's a list of questions that I asked myself and I developed this list because I found myself in positions of leadership a lot more than I expected to be over time [...] I needed a system to sort of ground myself in and so a sort of a check-in. And what this did for me was allow me to double check when I felt like I making a lot of decisions, to check in with myself about like, *who am I accountable to when I enact any kind of any kind of leadership decision? Like who am I accountable to?* [...] *I'm just pulling up the list here, because I want to get this right. And so, yeah, so who am I accountable to? What community consents to my leadership when I assume it? How do those interactions function? Am I sure the people I'm accountable to have a traversable path to intervention, interruption, or dialogue when they feel differently than I do? Who helps me reel myself in when I assume harmful attitudes or replicate structural oppressions, internally or externally? Who do I turn to for counsel and support in holding myself accountable when I have caused harm? Do I acknowledge that we are all both, that we all both experience and cause harm? Do I believe that mass movements are grounded in relationships, and if so, am I working to build those relationships, or simply attempting to enforce ideas?*

The above is an example of a concrete accountability process to ensure leadership is accountable to a collective. Kelly shows humility and an understanding of intersecting oppressions by assuming that everyone, including themselves, can reproduce oppressive attitudes and must be held accountable if they do. Rather than conceptualizing accountability through the carceral logics of punishment, many organizers in our sample practiced accountability as relational processes that can leverage mutual support within the collective to ensure its success. This is similar to how abolitionist organizers unsettle cancel carceral culture by centering relationship building and repair when conflict ensues (brown, 2020). Fostering accountability mechanisms between leaders and care workers might involve having uncomfortable conversations based on Kelly’s questions to move forward. It is important to note that

Kelly shares that sometimes these processes are not a smooth ride; contradictions happen and people stumble as they navigate accountability. Yet, to ensure accountable leadership, accountability processes must be persistent and ongoing. By instilling a system of accountable ethical leadership, Kelly refuses to abandon themself and their leadership to being corrupted by unchecked authoritarian individualistic power, unaccountable to anyone. Accountable ethical leadership is based on building and tending to relationships rather than enforcing ideas or seeking to extract labor from people. Movement work is often volunteer-driven, as organizers address needs collectively outside of neoliberal and carceral systems that impose other expectations. For example, care workers have organized mutual aid funds to meet community needs at the neighborhood level, bypassing government assistance that often intrudes on their personal lives (Hayes & Kaba, 2023; Spade, 2020). Accordingly, people need to feel they are part of a collective that cares for them and their views unlike in extractive jobs shaped by neoliberal demands of productivity only (Adams et al., 2019; Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018). Kelly's leadership inquiry is one effective way to ensure accountability and care within leadership as a transformative practice of the freer worlds to which people within abolitionist organizing long to live.

Our results in this theme suggest that broadly, systems of accountability in abolitionist contexts are healing-based, which challenges carceral and punishment-oriented ideologies that sustain organized abandonment (Gilmore, 2007; Riley et al., 2024). Refusing to look for punishment as a form of justice encourages collectives to

name and address harm without making the person who harmed another disposable. Disproportionate punitive measures imposed on people who do harm may elicit defensiveness in many care workers to avoid accountability (Hayes & Kaba, 2023). Hence a reframing of accountability as healing instead of punishment embodies a relational value of refusing organized abandonment of people, including everyone in the process, in itself a rehumanizing task (Hayes & Kaba, 2023). By using healing circles, care workers invite people engaged in conflicts to transformative processes of accountability (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020).

To address conflict in generative ways, care workers resourced holistic solutions while considering anti-oppressive stances, co-creating settings of feedback to address and move past harm. Participants recognized that they are not able to do transformative work in the external world if they are not doing transformative work internally (brown, 2017; Hayes & Kaba, 2023). This embodiment of transformative change means instilling accountability mechanisms as an everyday practice to prevent and address conflict.

Scaling up accountability mechanisms must include internal work, facilitated by embedding restorative practices into daily routines and training staff regularly. Our analysis of interviews suggests that, when harm or conflict escalated despite best efforts, some organizers turned to outside facilitators. These facilitators played an important role in providing minoritized care workers with advanced skills and support, enhancing their ability to navigate and address conflicts. By integrating such support mechanisms, care work organizations counteract systemic isolation, an issue

closely linked to the carceral system (Gilmore, 2022; Hayes & Kaba, 2023). Systems of accountability have the potential of addressing and moving past conflict in generative ways, disrupt white supremacy culture within social justice organizations, and hold leaders in power accountable for their actions toward care co-workers.

Accountability has been studied as a public-facing endeavor, ensuring researchers and social change activists are accountable to the communities they intend to serve (George et al., 2023; Shaw et al., 2020), yet few research studies have covered accountability within organizing spaces (Ellison & Langhout, 2020). Nevertheless, from this limited body of scholarship, we learned that accountability is a key aspect of abolitionist movements (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020; Hayes & Kaba, 2023; Interrupting Criminalization & Research In Action, 2023). The current study extends these insights suggesting that accountability mechanisms have the potential to unsettle and liberate care workers from the police in our minds and hearts.

Chapter Summary

Revisiting the tree metaphor, where internal transformative change practices are likened to the roots, the practices outlined in this chapter ensure care nutrients are distributed throughout the entire system, from the roots to the understory of the forest. From our participants' interviews, we discerned four practices embodying their abolitionist visions. Rebellious values of care are ethical practices that center a shared responsibility for each other in abolitionist organizing settings (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020). To ensure people share responsibility for each other, decision-making processes aiming for heterarchy were practiced. Heterarchy ensures

interdependence, opening pathways to sharing power. Participants used consensus decision-making and spokes councils to make decisions in heterarchical ways, while making space for minoritized people to be trained in and assume positions of leadership, by more privileged care workers practicing depowerment (Huygens, 1997; Riemer et al., 2020; Savio, 2015). More equitable decision-making practices can ensure accountability between leaders and care workers without resorting to prosecutorial moments that stem from carcerality (brown, 2017; Hayes & Kaba, 2023). Participants practice accountability as a means to refuse systemic abandonment of minoritized people. By centering care and interdependence in abolitionist spaces, organizers and care workers contested punitive logics and prosecutorial moments, addressing conflict and harm in transformative ways. Many conflicts stemmed from white supremacy culture, which can be unsettled by sharing power and ensuring an ethical and accountable leadership. Healing/restorative justice circles were observed throughout all themes, as a key transformative change mechanism to nurture care and flatten power differentials.

Transformative change practices within an abolitionist framework actualized rebellious values of care through embodied relationality, embracing people's expertise through consensus decision-making processes aiming for heterarchy, and instilling accountability mechanisms to address harm and create feedback loops from care workers to leadership. These practices stood out in our analysis as some of the most relevant for addressing our research question, shining light on transformative efforts from within the understories of abolitionist organizations, slowly actualizing

their liberation visions, thus addressing our research question. By integrating such practices, abolitionist organizations can foster conditions where power is shared and systemic injustices are consistently contested. Consensus decision-making and spokes councils become tools for training people within organizing spaces. As participants practiced depowerment and accountability, they created spaces where care workers and leaders alike are held to the same ethical standards, ensuring a collective responsibility. This holistic approach nurtures a culture of care that permeates from the roots to the tree canopy of the movement, embodying a vision of transformative justice and communal well-being. In this ecosystem of change, the circle emerges as a fundamental practice, symbolizing the cyclical and ongoing nature of nurturing care, abolishing oppressive structures and ideologies, and fostering transformative change and liberation. Internal organizational transformative change practices discerned in our analysis may shape external community transformative change actions, as organizers embody the liberated worlds they seek through abolitionist praxis. embodying the liberated worlds abolition seeks.

Chapter 5: Tree Branches External Community-Based Transformative Change Actions

Transformative change actions aim to address community problems at their roots (Kivell et al., 2023). In order to address our research question on how care workers and organizers embody transformative change, we emphasize how the internal transformative change practices discussed in the previous chapter shaped organizations' external actions.

In the ecosystem of transformative change, the research team aimed to pinpoint the ways in which the embodiment of transformative change manifests both through internal organizational practices and external community-based actions. These internal and external settings are separate yet interconnected, each playing a crucial role in the broader process of social change. This dual focus is important because it reflects the holistic nature of praxis or embodiment of transformative change, which involves aligning the practices (i.e., rebellious values of care) that change-makers can influence within their organizing settings with those they implement in the communities they aim to serve.

In other words, the practice grounds of social change, as framed by our research question, encompass both internal and the external. These distinct, yet mutually interrelated settings offer insights by which transformative social change may disrupt and perhaps someday ultimately transform oppressive conditions born out of systemic abandonment, at the community grassroots level. By highlighting the theme pathways from internal practices to external actions, we underscore our

participants' praxis integrity while navigating structural challenges to this alignment, as there cannot be complete alignment while surviving carceral systems. Thus, in this section, we present insights discerned from our analysis, exploring how each transformative change tree root practice shapes external actions. Next, we examine how the embodiment of these practices by organizers and care workers' mold actions in the community, effectively remaking fairer worlds through praxis. Thus, this chapter illustrates the fractal interconnectedness of the transformative change tree, from its roots to its branches, connected by their abolitionist visions and theories of change.

Rebellious Values of Care in the Community

Rebellious values of care are an internal organizational transformative practice that, when enacted, can shape the assertion of care within community spaces. Such values rebel against the neoliberal morality of 'minding one's own business' by making it a priority to care for others (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018; Held, 2005). Most importantly, a shift to centering care reverberates from within organizations to their programming and service work.

Rebellious values of care are embodied through circles in participants' actions to serve their communities. As a relational response to harm (Winn, 2023), circles can assist in nurturing caring relationships. RJ works in a restorative justice organization that holds circles for youth in neighborhoods and schools, often to respond to conflict. While sharing the circle process, RJ shared their circle opening started with a creative exercise, often reading spoken poetry, doing mindful breathing together, or listening

to a song tied to a theme pertinent to the circle, to ground people. They follow with a check-in question and introductions to check the room temperature. Community/group agreements, such as “step back, step forward,” are design to assist participants in remaining aware of the space they occupy within the circle and and to ensure they make space for others to share their ideas. RJ shares the importance of discussing values shaping the circle’s process:

> So, once we've set those agreements and those courtesies, we can move forward into the circle. And one of the first things we may do is ask folks to provide values [...]. We'll give everybody a piece of paper and a marker and we'll ask them to write a value on that piece of paper. And a value is something that you hold dear to yourself, something that's important to you. When it comes to relationships or when it comes to building trust with others and when people are writing, somebody might write “loyalty.” Somebody might write “trust.” Somebody might write “patience.” Somebody might write “compassion” or “empathy” or even “humor” or “joy” or anything of that nature. But people are just writing what's important to them. And *then we ask them to share why they chose that value and the reason why we do that is because we really just want to get an understanding of who you are and why or what is the thing that, like, you hold dear to your heart when it comes to building relationships with others. Right? So we start out with that aspect to kind of just build a sense of community, a sense of connection. And a sense of just commitment, you know, and you just, like, joining the circle.* And once we've done all those steps, depending on what the circle is about, we'll have, like, a set of questions that we'll ask and depending on what the topic is and the topic could easily be somewhere from relationships with women, the topic could be about, like, childhood trauma. The topic could be about masculinity and just how we see each other as men. The topic could be about race and racism and culture. The topic could be about gang violence or just how we kind of treat each other in the community. [...] making sure that we check in with each other and our mental health.The topic could be about, like, our physical health too, going to the doctor [...] and we'll have a round of questions and we'll just [...] have a dialogue about it. And then once we've had our discussion and have, a good amount of time talking about we'll check out, right? So we'll have a checkout question just to ask how folks are feeling after we've had this kind of conversation because we don't want to leave people on edge or leave people open after [...] being vulnerable with us telling their story or sharing things that they probably have never said in their lives. So, we check out with them just to make sure everybody's good. And then we close

> the circle with some kind of closing ceremony, which could actually be again a poem, a song, [...], libations, anything that makes sense that would allow you know everybody to feel relieved and be able to leave from there.

RJ confided broad details about the circle process he and his organization hold in local neighborhoods and schools to address conflict and rebuild relationships. He shared how every single person within a circle is asked to write a value dear to their hearts and the reasons behind it to be shared with the group. By making space to share people's core values, people in the circle hold those values together to build trust and relationships, a sense of connection, and a commitment to co-construct a space of vulnerability. These practices are the embodiment of rebellious values of care through circle praxis. Sharing and connecting through explicitly shared values allows people within the circle to experience a sense of togetherness and presence to hold space for each other.

After the values-setting conversation, the facilitators share some questions related to the topic at hand, sometimes related to gender and race shaping relationships. It is important to note RJ shared topic examples that are tied to systems, such as sexism and racism. Circles are transformative practices that promote building and maintaining relationships within community spaces by discussing systemic issues that affect people's wellbeing. This dialogue encourages participants to reflect on their roles within these systems and consider actionable steps they may take to unlearn oppressive ideologies and dismantle oppressive structures in their own lives and communities.

To ensure community members leave the circle re-energized, they have a closing ceremony, which include sharing a poem or song, or having a drink together. Value-setting shapes the circle dialogue, instilling a shared sense of responsibility to hold each other's vulnerability with care. Through these transformative practices, circles may foster individual and collective healing, potentially creating a ripple effect that extends beyond the immediate group, as participants collectively heal from oppressive ideologies.

The practice of circles within organizing spaces and the community may be useful to acknowledge and bear witness to people's full humanity. Moreover, setting values through circles co-create spaces for vulnerability and connection. Research suggest early conversations about values facilitates collaboration between scholar-activists and community members (Langhout, 2015). Value setting helps to guide discussions in co-constructing theories of change that align with shared goals for research and action collaborations. Yet, conversations about values from participants' stories within community settings often focused more on process and relationship building rather than specific goals. Circles have the potential to foster spaces of care and support through the abolitionist principle of nurturing and maintaining the right relationship with one another (Hayes & Kaba, 2023). In other words, these relationships center mutual care for each other's well-being, thereby challenging the neoliberal emphasis on goal-centered productivity (Adams et al., 2019; Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018). Indeed, relationship building is core to act out values of care.

Relational Embodiment of Care in the Community

Embodied relationality takes root in the rebellious values of care to nurture spaces of reciprocal support that act upon the caring world many organizers envision. In a highly individualistic culture shaped by neoliberal pressures of the entrepreneurial self, seeking contentment through self-profit (Adams et al., 2019), embodying relationality can bridge individual self-care with collective care through a commitment to social justice (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018). Such commitments were embodied by our participants internally within organizing settings through relational practices, such as circles, as explored in the previous chapter. Externally, relational care practices may instill solidarity among people across identity group differences.

A relational embodiment of care may promote intersectional solidarity in organizing and protest spaces, reclaiming safety practices in non-carceral ways. Amina is a Muslim Asian scholar-activist working in solidarity with people impacted by carceral systems. Amina took part in organizing several direct actions through her high school, college, and graduate school years. Amina was part of the cultural and artistic wing of a radical organizing group called UR that took on issues of youth justice. At UR's cultural events, organizers co-created liberated zones where they provided their own security, welcomed people with friendliness, and sought people's consent before doing safety pat-downs. Amina saw the enacting of the abolitionist principles "we keep each other safe." Around that time, protests occurred against the 1999 Seattle World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference, which was a symbol of neoliberalism and organized abandonment (Gilmore, 2007; Riley et al., 2024). The WTO welcomed global leaders that put corporate profit over people's well-being

through policy-making. At its time, the WTO or the "Battle of Seattle" became one of the largest protests in the history of WTO conferences, with tens of thousands of people in the streets. The protest strategies were varied and innovative, from teach-ins on policy, to street theater and civil disobedience (Smith, 2006). Amina and people from UR and other organizing groups in her location took part in the WTO protests, where Amina shared:

> I think like the spaces we made in UR and the experiences I had at the WTO protest were like, were my glimpses of like liberation [...]. They were, we were able to create these, I think for two different reasons: [...] UR events where like these liberated zones, right? [...] So we learned to keep each other safe [...]. At the WTO one, [...] I was using my camera more as like accountability for the cops than like to document what was going on. [...] I have such a distinct [...] embodied memory of what it meant to take over the street there and to feel like it was in that we were in battle [...] There was tear gas and we were- I was in a contingent of Indigenous people. [...] We had to protect them because they weren't [...] documented people. And so we were protecting them and in communication with others about where was safe to go and things like that. [...] I just was really like lucky to [...] be in a community of people who actually thought we- we could transform the world, right? And on top of that, [...] most of us grew up in the Bay Area, we had [...] Black Panther elders and Asian American activists [...] Indigenous activists, and Latinx activists who were all there and had been in those histories in the 60s and 70s, and they were transmitting their knowledge to us.

Amina shared she experienced embodied relationality in a high stakes organizing space that offered glimpses of the liberated worlds activists look up to, over the tree canopy. The UR events co-created liberated zones of artistic expression through spoken poetry around youth justice issues. Through UR, Amina learned safety did not need to lead to criminalizing people but to embody the activist motto, "we keep each other safe." Amina noted that UR's internal practices of embodied relationality were influential during the WTO massive external action protests, where

Amina found herself surrounded by others in solidarity with Indigenous people without authorization. People kept each other safe facing violent police repression. At the WTO protests, Amina learned much from elder activists from different ethnic groups, passing on valuable insights from their experience organizing during the 1960s and 1970s civil rights movements.

A similar culture of care Amina learned from at UR shaped her group's actions during the WTO protests. At these protests, tens of thousands of organizers and activists were in solidarity with those who faced systemic harm in the form of imprisonment and deportation such as Indigenous people without authorization. This culture of care was nurtured intersectionally, between people from different ethnic groups and ages, but with a reflective commitment to justice. Politicized spaces like the WTO protests offered energy surges to co-create systemic change (Hayes & Kaba, 2023). When organizers embody relational caring practices in their own events like Amina observed at UR, they remember and act out these practices to keep each other safe when facing together carceral violence in the form of police repression. Amina's story stressed how care is embodied through communal and relational concrete acts that keep people safe, especially those who are most vulnerable to systemic violence. Indeed, people need each other, and when they embody how much they matter to each other during high-risk moments facing carceral violence, glimpses of liberation shine through from within the forest (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020). Amina herself made the connections between the internal and external

relational embodiment of care, as both are deeply interconnected in abolitionist organizing.

Based on our analysis of interviews, such embodied ways that center relationality based on enacting values of care were transformative to Amina and other participants. Reclaiming safety in a way that centers care rather than punitive and carceral violence, abolitionist organizers embodied relational practices to keep each other safe, within their organizing spaces and in protest actions striving for liberated worlds. To embody relationality in ways that center care and relationship-building by activists and care workers, equitable decision-making processes must be ensured.

Decision-making Processes Aiming for Heterarchy in the Community

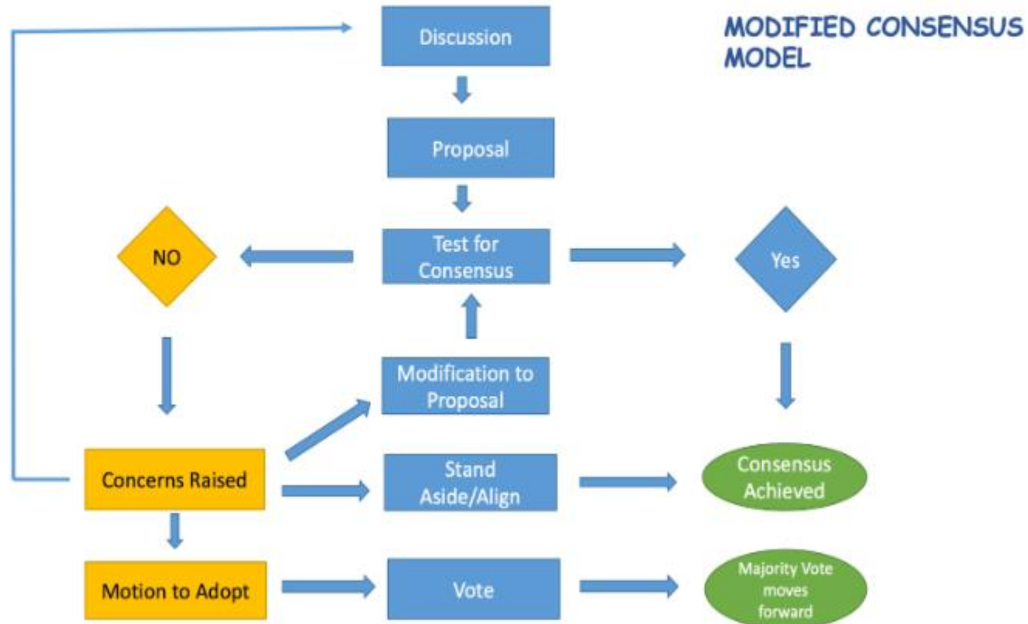
Decision-making processes within organizing settings, according to our participants, included versions of consensus-decision making such as the spokes council approach (Savio, 2015). Decision-making processes that involve consensus are aligned with heterarchy, since they encourage descentralized decision-making through power sharing (Gallegos-Riofrío et al., 2021; Tebes & Thai, 2018). As consensus decision-making shaped many abolitinionist organizing spaces, it also appeared in participants' reports of decision-making processes within community spaces. TN was representing their organization within a larger coalition of organizations coordinating community-centered and anti-racist approaches to redirect funds and efforts from prisons to care-providing services. The coalition coalesced around seeking to address the disproportionate targeting of Black people within carceral systems, which has been widely documented (Alexander, 2020). TN shared a modified consensus-based model

the coalition uses, appearing in their coalition group agreements (see figure 2 below the quote). TN shares:

> We use a modified consensus based model and there's a whole chart. That's for that is for that. *The coalition is so big that we use modified consensus based models, and then we also have our own process for rapid decision making [...]. I think the chart can do a much better job of explaining. But we start with a discussion. Somebody makes for a proposal. We test consensus and then it's iterative from there until we can get to a place where, like a super majority aligns, if there are.* The work has to move, you know? So, if there is a difference then we create a space to talk about like how much is needed to move through. Like people who were blocking or saying no but usually we, seven [organizations], we are like we are so connected that there isn't ever, *we haven't had a block, but we plan for that as well. And that may mean that like that particular issue is just not ready to be moved. Like there's just more work that needs to be done.* Uh, before it goes back to uh, before we go back to testing for consensus. [...] where it worked [...] *Here's an example on the chat, and this is our budget platform for the year. So it's very detailed, [...] like minutia of what we want the county to do and to build a care, a behavioral healthcare system.* There was a lot of negotiation that went into this, and we did it all in six weeks. It's continually iterating, so that it is definitely changing, but it is in a place that is good enough for us to go to elected [officials] and start doing our advocacy and to share. *We've begun sharing this platform with people inside of the jail to get their buy in and feedback. But we had to land on something, right? [...] it's not that much money. It's like the least amount of money. But within this there is a line for hospitalization. We've decided that we are putting it in there because it is reflective of what two organizations really wanted, [...] We're not going to lift it up [...] when we go because we do acknowledge that there are people in the world who do need hospitalization [...] The number is quite small and we're not trying to add any hospital beds. We're just saying we don't want those hospital beds to disappear, right? So, we're not further entrenching the system with more involuntary treatment.* That was, this is a reflection of a consensus based decision process where we began creating, where there were concessions and negotiations and compromises that made. And if somebody asks us about it, we're going have a talking point right of like, "why it's in here." *And [...] the largest dollar amount is in here is number twelve, $80 million for permanent supportive housing and that is something that everybody, we have multiple solutions. And it's something that everyone is agreeing on is our like number one thing, because we know it's the most ambitious and the hardest to win. And we've had to be very thoughtful in how we ran this decision-making process.* And we basically like went through this thing line by line and and asked if people had anything to add.

Figure 2

TN's Care Coalition Modified Consensus-Based Model



Note. This figure demonstrates the modified consensus-based model the coalition of care organizations decided upon to make decisions concerning their advocacy work to redirect funds and efforts from carceral systems to care-providing endeavors. A majority vote means having the support of 75% or more of the participating organizations in the coalition.

TN shared a concrete modified-consensus model practice for community-based coalition work designed to secure funding for care services that address the needs of minoritized people, rather than criminalizing them for unmet needs related to systemic barriers to access. TN's coalition consisted of over a dozen organizations, each with one vote. The process began with the review of a proposal, followed by a discussion to test consensus until a super majority of more than 75% is achieved. Organizations had the power to block a proposal, which allowed for further

discussion and review of the proposal for further deliberation on the proposition. TN provided a detailed example of this modified consensus-based model in action. The coalition discussed a behavioral care system proposal, with deliberations spanning several weeks. Once the coalition assessed that the proposal was ready, it was shared with community members, particularly with those who were systemically impacted and incarcerated, to gather their feedback. The proposal was also shared with supportive elected officials. Following these reviews, the proposal underwent further concessions and negotiations.

Many of the organizations within the coalition are abolitionist, leading them to critically assess the risks of hospitalization as a form of institutionalization. This concern arises from psychological diagnoses that are often based on perceptions of dangerousness by court officials and mental health care practitioners (Ben-Moshe, 2020). Because of this concern, contradictions emerged during the coalition's negotiation of concessions. In the quote above TN shared how the coalition accommodated requests from two organizations by allocating some funds for hospitalization, acknowledging that, for some people, hospitalization can be beneficial while avoiding entrenchment in the system with involuntary treatment. Making concessions through intentional discussion of systemic issues to promote consensus allows the coalition to thoughtfully decide which care programs to support in their abolitionist effort of redirecting funds from punitive carcerality to caring healing.

A point of consensus among all organizations within the coalition was the importance of permanent housing. Meeting people's basic needs is fundamental to transformative solutions addressing social problems. Research supports this, as a mixed-methods literature review pointed out that providing housing for people with mental health issues - ensuring safe living conditions, privacy, and access to identity-based amenities - successfully promoted their well-being (Friesinger et al., 2019). Supporting permanent housing in a place heavily impacted by high housing costs may significantly benefit people struggling with mental health issues. By allocating resources to mental health support through hospitalization while also ensuring access to permanent housing for people struggling with mental health issues, the coalition embraces divergent approaches to enhance the well-being of some of the most impacted community members. Embracing divergent solutions rather than relying on a single monolithic program to address problems can build up momentum for incremental social change (Langhout, 2016; Rappaport, 1987). Indeed, divergent approaches can be effective vehicles for organizers to engage in solidarity and promote social change.

TN's example was an effective modified consensus model similar to the spokes council approach, facilitating democratic-decision making between several care work organizations (brown, 2017; Savio, 2015). The coalition's modified consensus model moved forward a proposal while ensuring feedback loops among coalition member organizations to make it stronger, allowing space for concessions and negotiations. TN's coalition modified consensus functioned as a heterarchical

decision-making process, since it descentrilized power roles by ensuring decisions were not made in centralized ways, fostering healthy debate, thoughtful negotiation, and negotiated agreements (Gallegos-Riofrío et al., 2021; Tebes & Thai, 2018). The agreed recommendations to redirect funding and resources from carceral punishment-based systems to mental health care healing-based support was taken by the county's board of supervisors. A vote will ensue as of this year. The coalition's work was effective by making the proposal accountable to care work organizers, and uplifting the needs of people they serve, thereby increasing the likelihood of the impact of their programming. Indeed, accountability to the community is core to transformative praxis.

Accountability: Refusing Abandonment in the Community

Change-makers in our sample refused to abandon each other given they face the systemic abandonment of people by a carceral state that fails to provide equitable avenues to meet their needs. According to our participants, internal organizational accountability mechanisms involved circles as a care-centered practice to address conflict within their organizing settings (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020). Accountability mechanisms in the community embody a relational care-centered praxis as well, like tree roots that sustain and nurture even those whom society teaches us to abandon from the canopy of our communal forest.

Accountability praxis may thus bring people together, challenging carceral pressures to succumb to the organized abandonment of minoritized people, particularly those impacted by incarceration and their family members. Blue works

for an abolitionist care work organization. Blue's family is from Nigeria. She mentioned how justice practices from her parents' place of origin are based on land and relationship - unaddressed harm is perceived as an abomination. Any harm done in the community would require a community response that would redress the conflict in generative ways seeking collective healing. To promote alternatives to carceral systems, Blue took part in a healing circle outside a prison. Blue shared,

> We had a rally and a healing circle at [the] jail. And that movement was really important because we wanted to bring the voices of the people to folks inside and vice versa, have their voices recorded. Voices speak to people outside, and we had a march and made sure that folks inside could hear us. And first family members who were affected by this to be able to, like, speak their truth and and grieve together. [...] [We] not only are sharing about like the experience of being a mental health provider or someone that's a family member of someone who's seriously mentally ill, but, you know, giving the facts of, like, this is, how much it costs to jail someone. This is how much it costs to provide behavioral health care. And that it's a striking difference. I think it's like a two to one difference.

Blue is part of a coalition of abolitionist organizations that worked together to organize a rally and healing circle outside a prison, effectively making their abolitionist work accountable to some of the people most affected by carceral harm: people imprisoned and their family members. As shared before, many participants' view accountability as a refusal to abandon people to carceral systems and addressing carcerality as an ideology. The goal was to co-create a space of dialogue between people incarcerated and those outside, where family members of people institutionalized could also speak their truth. This action had a political education component. People engaged in the action co-created talking points for the media with the hope of contributing to culture shifts from punitive ideologies that support

carceral systems to healing mindsets that nurture accountability through community care and relationality. Those same punitive ideologies impose sacrifice through organized abandonment, weaponized by carceral policies (Gilmore, 2022). One key talking point offered to the media highlighted the financial loss state institutions incur by investing in carceral systems to punish people rather than preventing mental health problems. Indeed, the costs of carceral systems not only burden the taxpayer but also have negative financial impacts to imprisoned people's families and communities (Hirschberger, 2020; McLaughlin et al., 2016).

Political education to de-ideologize from carceral mindsets can bring people closer together, centering impacted people's stories, showing people committed to carceral systems that there are alternatives, such as circles, that seek actual accountability through healing rather than promoting further harm. Centering care for those in society teaches to accept their abandonment is core to accountability practices in community actions. Kelly shares:

> I've participated in a lot of actions over the years at the Juvenile Detention Center. And so we do sometimes noise demos outside at Christmas time, we sometimes, we'll have caroling. One year we were able to bring a brass band out there for the caroling. And you know, we put up on lighted displays for the children inside and when we interact with those children, when they raise their fists in the window or write messages in soap or cheer or flicker their lights. People are connecting with people that they are being conditioned by the society to forget. And that is so important. It is reestablishing a relationship, a sense of relationship, a sense of, of obligation, a sense of connection to people whose erasure, whose containment, whose disposal is normalized under capitalism. It's a way of raging against that, and regrounded ourselves, right, by dismantling the illusion of our separateness. And so in those moments, I see people routinely moved to tears, and really deepened in their politics and grounded in their values. You know, it fulfills a community need and that those children obviously need us to show up and remind them that they are loved and that they are supported and that we are fighting to

> change the conditions that put them there. But it also changes something in us, or at least solidifies something in us in terms of a political orientation towards incarcerated people, towards other people in general. There are transformative values at work that are reinforced by the action itself.

Often actions from organizers seek to make society accountable to people impacted by systems. Such concrete actions challenge organized abandonment, re-educating ourselves to remember people who society ideologically tells us we should forget (Gilmore, 2022), people to whom change-makers in our sample are accountable. Accountability was conceptualized in the internal organizational practices chapter as being deeply interconnected with a refusal to abandon and a commitment to connect with those most impacted. In a sense, Kelly's action encourages people to feel a sense of shared responsibility and obligation to connect with people disposed of by normalized systems of oppression sustaining carcerality such as neoliberal capitalism (Hartnett, 2008). By getting emotionally, psychologically, and physically close in remembering impacted people together, organizers can reduce the systemic and planned separateness between people with different levels of risks and contacts with carceral systems (Hayes & Kaba, 2023). Indeed, as Kelly says, taking action embodying the liberated worlds we most desperately need solidifies organizers' transformative work. Transformative work within organizing spaces and in the community allow us to remember a fairer world is within the collective grasp of people.

Both actions discussed in this section highlight organizers' commitment to bringing people from outside close to carceral spaces of harm, such as jails and juvenile detention centers. When community members, including friends and family

of those incarcerated, witness the support of both familiar faces and strangers who showed up to learn about carceral systems and bring music to people inside, they might realize “their own investment is worthwhile” (brown, 2017, p. 38). These actions, which oppose abandonment and prioritize care, challenge the power differentials created by carceral structures and systems of oppression, actualizing accountability to refuse abandonment “"both 'inside' and 'outside' the tent" (George et al., 2023, p. 12). Bringing holiday songs to children who are incarcerated, and seeing their lights flicker in response disrupts the systemic borders of abandonment designed to separate people. Such efforts might bring hope to people incarcerated and might inspire people joining or learning about the actions to deprogram from ideologies of harm that sustain carceral structures of oppression. Most importantly, relational acts of care that reach out to those isolated may show imprisoned people that they are not forgotten or shunned by their communities. Relational acts such as circles and Christmas caroling might demonstrate activist actions are accountable to people facing carceral punishment. The flickers of liberation sparked by the children inside illuminate this intentional connection.

Chapter Summary

The transformative change actions outlined in this section were shaped by internal transformative change practices undertaken within organizing spaces. Although the themes relayed do not encompass every transformative action that participants engaged in, the interconnections between internal practices and external actions drawn in this section highlight the important role of praxis in transformative

change work. The rooted social change internal organizational practices provided essential nutrients for social change, reflecting and enacting abolitionist visions of liberated worlds. These practices laid the foundation for co-creating liberated spaces where many worlds can co-exist (Marcos, 2003) and people systemically impacted may access the necessary support to thrive.

The connections drawn in this section emphasize how internal organizational practices of change shape the contours of external community actions organizers undertake. The transformative actions discerned in this section - whether through relational embodiment of rebellious values of care, decision-making processes, or accountability mechanisms to refuse organized abandonment - are interconnected. They contribute to the broader understory forest of social change, demonstrating that these actions are not isolated but are part of an ongoing, dynamic, and sometimes divergent process. This consistently embodied process shapes and is shaped by the practices and visions nurtured within care work and organizing spaces.

Liberated worlds, where multiple realities and minoritized perspectives are embraced and systemic barriers abolished, where people who face and struggle through systemic barriers can flourish, are embodied through branched transformative change actions. By focusing on relational care, modifying consensus decision-making to build power and co-create policy that actually serves people, and nurturing steadfast accountability to those we are taught to abandon, these actions demonstrate the potential for co-creating meaningful and sustainable impact. The forest understory of social change movements, with its ever-flowing and evolving nature adapting to

increasingly authoritarian circumstances, illustrates how transformative visions, practices, and actions are in constant flux, co-creating glimpses of fairer worlds in the making.

The interplay between internal practices and external actions reveals the profound influence of foundational visions and practices on practical outcomes. These transformative change actions, rooted in abolitionist principles and driven by a commitment to care and accountability, demonstrate the ongoing co-construction of more just liberated spaces. Through these interconnected practices, the vision of social transformation is nurtured and developed, reflecting the steadfast commitment of those dedicated in remaking our worlds. Indeed, transformative visions, practices, and actions are integral to the forest understory of social change movements, ever flowing, in the making.

Chapter 6 The Forest Understory: Conclusions, Limitations, and Implications

The purpose of this dissertation is to discern how care workers and organizers embody the social change they envision in society, through transformative practices and actions. Through our analysis, the understory of the forest symbolizes transformative change praxis. Just as roots represent internal change practices which shape external community change actions, care nutrients flow through the tree, shaping abolitionist visions through acting out on those commitments to shine light through the branches on fairer worlds in the making. Our analysis discerned insights gifted by our participants. In this chapter, we relay our conclusions, followed by limitations to the study.

Conclusion of the Understory

Visions and Theories of Transformative Change

Abolitionist visions contain the promise of dismantling carcerality as a system of harm and pervasive ailment. Similar to how parasitic fungi entrap the roots of a forest, carcerality ensnares people even after their release from carceral systems, causing systemic harm to them and their communities, and deep psychological consequences, including internalized shaming (Austin, 2004; Gilmore, 2007; Haney, 2020b). Carceral structures can stifle the growth of the forest's roots, undermining foundational systems and practices that are essential for community health and human dignity. In contrast, abolition serves as a trasformative praxis that has the potential to nurture and regenerate the forest understory. By regenerating collective efforts to heal and serve their communities, people can rehumanize themselves. Yet, transformative

work is not linear and takes many forms. Reform non-reform work can be actualized through harm reduction, for instance lobbying for decriminalization. Advancing structural reforms aimed at abolishing carcerality also require de-ideologizing work.

Abolition involves both dismantling and creating mechanisms to unsettle carcerality and its punitive culture (Gilmore, 2022; Hayes & Kaba, 2023). Participants emphasized moving away from viewing justice through the lens of punishment, instead focusing on community healing. Their goal was to co-construct a world that does not respond to violence with more violence. By replacing punitive cultures and practices with those centering care and healing, abolitionist organizers envision ensuring that nourishing care nutrients flow intentionally throughout the forest, promoting new growth and the health of the understory. Participants consistently reasserted their own and others' humanity by engaging in healing practices that center relationality, opening pathways for all people to thrive. Consequently, such revitalizing efforts can restore and sustain a forest ecosystem. An abolitionist vision seeks to rebuild community relations and prioritize collective well-being as essential for survival. To center community well-being, participants collaborated in creating social change practices within their organizing settings, shaping their transformative praxis in the community.

Internal Organizational Transformative Change Practices Shaping External Community-Based Actions

Care work organizations can become the practice grounds for liberating efforts in the

understory of the forest. Transformative change practices embodied by change-makers can co-create concrete alternatives to establish new undergrowth toward more just conditions of co-existence within organizing settings and shaping programming and actions in the community. Often guided by internal organizational change practices, initiatives to enact change in the community enable the tree to extend its branches into the forest, spreading seeds of liberation. Transformative change actions in the community may distribute nutrients from the understory to the forest. From our analysis, we discerned four practices that appeared in internal organizational processes and external community-based actions, which appeared to be interconnected with each other.

Rebellious Values of Care. Care is an act of rebellion against the "forced disposability" and systemic abandonment of minoritized people, which contribute to detach groups from one another to oppress them (i.e., alienation sustains exploitation; Bronfenbrenner, 1980). Centering care actualizes a commitment to justice by recognizing that liberation is a collective endeavor, with each person's liberation intertwined with that of others. One way to embody shared visions of liberation is by internally setting values within organizing settings.

Participants discussed care-centered values and agreements to promote fluid conversations in organizations. Fluidity was conceptualized as genuinely engaging with people's perspectives and experiences with care, and strategizing ways to meet goals by embracing divergent approaches to address issues (Langhout, 2016; Rappaport, 1981). Embracing diversity is integral to the sustainability of movements,

as it incorporates divergent lived experiences, perspectives, and tactics in approaching social problems. Yet, relational work to bridge differences is often gendered and racialized, with BIPOC bearing a disproportionate emotional and psychological burden in managing conflicts within movements (Ellison & Langhout, 2020). Thus centering BIPOC liberation is a core value for many organizations. Organizers cultivate a culture of care that leans into joy to resist capitalist workplace norms (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018; Finley & Esposito, 2012). Shared responsibility for people's well-being counters neoliberal pressures of the entrepreneurial self that often place individual responsibility on promoting people's self-development (Gampa & Sawyer, 2023). Thus fluidity was encouraged by setting values based on care and ensuring people from minoritized social positions could share their expertise. Embracing a rebellious culture of care as an internal organizational practice may shape how organizers and care workers instill values of care in community spaces.

Rebellious values move from the rooted internal organizational practices to care workers' programs and actions (Hayes & Kaba, 2023). Circles were used to discuss community agreements and values that encourage spaces of vulnerability to discuss important issues with the group. Some of these issues stem from systems of oppression such as white supremacy and patriarchy, making it crucial to establish values that facilitate navigating difficult conversations. Yet, community circles are also employed to build relationships among people, which is important to keep building power. Relationality is thus essential to ground values into embodied praxis.

Relational Embodiment of Care. Relationality builds on the value of care by intertwining individual and collective experiences of care, challenging neoliberal co-optation of care practices for individual or corporate profit-only, and advancing social change toward justice (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2018). By embodying rebellious values of care, organizations ensure care nutrients flow from the internal organizational praxis roots to the rest of the tree. Thus building and sustaining relationships becomes the practice ground of abolitionist organizing. One way to ensure care nutrients reach people is through circles. Circles are used to address conflict and as a relational practice that transcends hierarchies, allowing people to check-in. These organizational practices recognize people's full humanity beyond work and productivity.

Care workers celebrate each other's full humanity by honoring each other's achievements and embodying values of care through centering relationality. Promoting honest conversations about workload, where team members can openly discuss their capacities and limits, helps distribute labor more equitably. Encouraging positive feedback on people's efforts, such as publicly acknowledging contributions during check-in meetings reinforces collective relational practices. By consistently valuing and recognizing people's contributions, abolitionist organizers foster relationality. In work environments dominated by neoliberal expectations, where productivity is the primary goal, life becomes a means to meet profitable targets. In transformative care work settings, in order to co-create alternatives, life must be treated as precious in itself, and as a relational commitment to a shared struggle for

survival (Hayes & Kaba, 2023). Participants co-constructed fairer organizing settings by distributing relational care nutrients throughout the social change tree, celebrating each other's work, and acknowledging their lives outside of work through circle check-ins. Care workers dream and act in liberating ways by challenging exploitative and punitive approaches with relational practices centering the embodiment of care.

Just as relationality imbues a culture of care into organizing settings, care workers and organizers enact values of care through external actions. During organizing cultural events and protests, people ensured each other's safety. They embodied their social justice values by safeguarding people who were most vulnerable to being targeted by carceral repression. Their value of care is embodied by reflecting and acting to disrupt power shaping the experience of oppression during contentious times in political protest spaces. Centering relationships and relationality is crucial to social change movements (Hayes & Kaba, 2023). To advance organizing toward movements' liberating goals, equitable decision-making must be nurtured.

Decision-making Processes Aiming for Heterarchy. Heterarchies branch away from hierarchical fixed roles by decentralizing decision-making power, roles, and tasks within organizing settings and beyond (Gallegos-Riofrío et al., 2021). Abolitionist care workers and organizers employed several mechanisms aiming to foster heterarchy in decision-making in their organizations. Participants used circles to foster transparent conversations and promote agency among care workers. When discussing which grants to pursue, some participants engaged their entire programming team to discuss if the grant's goals were aligned with the group's

values. Since some grant deliverables tend to focus on individual outcomes rather than collective impact (Finley & Esposito, 2012), including programming teams in fundraising decisions helps care work organizations stay aligned with their transformative values and goals. This alignment is often supported by decision-making practices that are mindful of power.

Depowerment can be applied to ensure that decision-making processes unsettle power differentials, embracing shared leadership models. One consensus decision-making practice that participants used to unsettle power differentials involved spokes councils, a form of consensus-decision practice to coordinate large group efforts (Savio, 2015). Spokes councils allow small groups to discuss agenda points and relay their perspectives to the larger group in an organized manner. Such shared decision-making practices may foster inclusive processes to embrace minoritized care workers in leadership roles, incorporating their positional expertise surviving systems of oppression in decisions possibly impacting their communities. Participants established clear pathways to leadership for minoritized care workers who were formerly incarcerated. These pathways provided mentorship and scaffolded the expansion of shared leadership roles and responsibilities. As part of these leadership mentorship practices, care workers implemented “show and learn” processes, building skills and capacities within their groups. Heterarchical decision-making redistributed leadership roles, agency, and mutual accountability within care workers to support transformative work in the community (Tebes & Thai, 2018).

Implementing decision-making practices to embrace more people's perspectives into programming and actions in the community can be helpful in building and maintaining relationships to sustain transformative work. Once again, some organizations modified consensus-building processes (e.g., spokes councils; Savio, 2015), this time to build coalitions to ensure care work and social services are funded. When contradictions arose, given different organizations' distinct pressing goals, care workers negotiated and made concessions. Social change work may require ameliorative approaches such as increasing hospital beds in psychiatric hospitals, at the same time as systemic approaches such as reallocating resources to prevent mental health issues from requiring hospitalization. When opposing goals clash in coalition organizing spaces in the community, there's a risk of breaking trust and losing momentum. Processes that establish consensus as the basis of organizing have the potential to make organizers representing different needs feel heard. Complex problems require divergent approaches to address them (Langhout, 2016; Rappaport, 1987). One such approach involves processes that ensure gaining the consensus of different organizations with similar goals to serve the community. Consensus-based decision-making processes may be effective to build power between different care work organizations and collectives, to increase the impact of their actions. To widen people's impactful transformative work, practices that work to address conflict internally might help address ruptures in organizing spaces, and ensure actions are accountable to the communities many organizers aim to serve.

Accountability: Refusing Abandonment. Accountability practices within and outside organizing settings can promote healing by addressing conflict and disagreement, and disrupting the systemic abandonment of people (Gilmore, 2022). Carceral views of justice can be internalized in organizing spaces when ruptures are not managed to promote collective learning moments and the embodiment of care (brown, 2020). Care is often difficult to center when people become defensive in anticipation of being punished for their mistakes. But by embedding a culture of care into work practices, organizations can nurture the care roots of their praxis. Change-makers may encourage people to examine assumptions that might have contributed to conflicts, identify common sources of group disagreement, and seek outside support when necessary. Abolitionist consultants often work to challenge oppressive work dynamics, which can stem from white supremacy culture. Participants engaged in consulting for social justice organizations shared that one-on-one meetings and circles were sometimes effective in managing conflicts, Advisory committees played an important role in ensuring the continuing dismantling of white supremacy culture after significant structural changes had been made to unsettle oppressive organizational systems, procedures, and dynamics. These accountability processes focused on curiosity rather than punitive measures, promoting difficult conversations, where participants aimed to embody care during challenging moments. Centering curiosity promotes a caring culture, with accountability starting at the leadership level.

Some participants occupying leadership positions established accountability mechanisms to ensure accountability to organizers and care workers. These mechanisms promote humility and acknowledge that everyone can perpetuate oppressive behaviors. The goal is to facilitate dialogue when people disagree or when leaders exert their power in oppressive or unfair ways. Ensuring accountability practices from leaders organizers and care workers might encourage the sustainability of movement work.

Since movement work is often done on a volunteer basis, organizers must co-create conditions where the work people contribute makes them feel part of a community, addressing needs beyond neoliberal and carceral frameworks. People need to feel cared for to wholeheartedly engage in the care work they are committed to pursuing. Thus accountability becomes a foundational practice to liberate participants from both carceral logics in people's minds and power-hoarding mentalities. Practices that work to address conflict internally can lay the groundwork for co-creating accountability mechanisms to the wider community.

Transformative change internal organizational practices shaped accountability actions taken in the community. Abolitionist organizers tend to address conflict by developing accountability measures that heal rather than exacerbate further violence and harm, outcomes often tied to engagement with carceral systems and their resulting negative impacts on communities (Hirschberger, 2020; McLaughlin et al., 2016). Enacting alternatives to carceral harm, participants organized rallies, healing circles, and played music near prisons and youth detention centers, with family

members of imprisoned people relaying their truths through prepared talking points to the media. Such actions demonstrate to people who are imprisoned and society at large that alternatives that center community care and relationality exist. Such alternatives bring people closer together when separated by carceral systems. By enacting a community care response through circles and showing people imprisoned that they are not forgotten, organizers and care workers reveal new fairer worlds in the making. They remember, dream, and grow new buds toward liberation, emphasizing that a just future is indeed possible through collective organizing embodying care. Despite organizers' best efforts, after every action, they might see limitations that need to be addressed for future actions. Outlining limitations openly allows people to collaborate in co-producing better outcomes. Following, I share the limitations of our study.

Limitations

As with all research studies, this dissertation had limitations. I divide this section on research analysis limitations and structural limitations to the project.

Our chosen analytic approach, Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), has its limitations. Although RTA was suitable for our studies' goals, alternative methods can facilitate the analysis of rich data, such as with our participants' stories. Narrative methods, which involve multiple readings of participants' stories can capture the complexity of their knowledge, revealing personal and master narratives that might reinforce or disrupt systemic oppression, thus shaping their social change efforts. These methods are particularly effective in embedding a researcher in nuanced

understandings of the tensions and contradictions of transformative work, within participants' life stories. A real strength if this method is that it does not require the compartmentalization of interview data into categories, allowing for a more nuanced and complex understanding of lived experience.

One structural limitation was the time constraints to defend related to my legal status and visa, shaped by punitive non-resident tuition fees imposed on international students if we do not adhere to that timeline. From the time I received IRB approval to the time I needed to submit this dissertation, I had 16 months to complete the project. During this period, I worked for the university at 50% time, engaged in several service and organizing roles in the university and professional organizations, applied for academic jobs to stay in the country, and handled job permit paperwork related to my international status. This time restriction, along with my various roles and responsibilities, and participants' impacted schedules outlined in the next paragraph, prevented me from conducting member checks to incorporate participants' perspectives into reviewing our analysis. For future manuscripts, we will engage in member checks with participants who are willing to be part of the process, to gather and imbue their feedback in our research.

Another structural limitation was the socio-political context at the time of data collection. Many activists and organizers across the country have engaged in massive collective actions calling for peace and a lasting ceasefire in occupied Palestine. These pressing needs, combined with a US presidential election year, likely left many would-be participants with limited time and low capacity. Lengthening the data

collection time window to accommodate participants' highly impacted schedules limited the time our team had to analyze the interviews - a timeline already constrained by my legal status limitations. Nevertheless, through great effort, my team and I conducted and transcribed 25 interviews, selecting 17 interviews to analyze, most relevant to address our research question through our analysis (see further details on Method chapter, analysis strategies section). I appreciate my team's collective effort to honor our participants' knowledge despite these limitations. We are committed to continue honoring them by engaging in member checks and relaying research results in the form of short reports or zines once the member check process is completed. Next, we share implications and future directions of our study.

Implications and Future Directions for Research and Praxis

In the face of the immense problem of carcerality, social change efforts have the potential to promote societal liberation from systems of oppression at grassroots levels. Transformative change - the type of change that aims to address the core root cause of problems - is difficult to actualize (Kivell et al., 2022). Social transformation is indeed a process, not truly an end goal (Rappaport, 1981). The most radically innovative solutions to problems might most likely bring unintended consequences in the forms of new problems (Langhout, 2016; Rappaport, 1987). By understanding and engaging in social transformation efforts as a process rather than an end goal, our participants worked with each other within their organizing settings, and with other more ameliorative organizations and organizers to move forward toward meeting collective goals. People running and benefiting from carceral systems of harm

coalesce around profit (Hayes & Kaba, 2023). In contrast, care work and organizing seeking social justice might have different theories of change to approach problems. By engaging in difficult conversations and working through difference, organizational practices can promote ideological healing from systems of oppression endemic within organizational structures such as white supremacy culture. This is movement work, sticking through the muddy challenges to find ways to connect roots, feeding care nutrients through the tree into the forest of social change.

This dissertation aimed to highlight concrete ways through which organizers and care workers are collaborating in transformative efforts to address issues. Insights gathered from participants on their praxis expand the research on the topic. For instance, not much research has focused on the process by which people in organizing settings set values (Kivell et al., 2023). This study highlighted how organizers employed circles to set values and build relational trust among participants. In order to promote settings that encourage nurturing trusting bonds between participants, western conceptions of 'power over' need to be unsettled, moving toward 'power with' approaches (Dussel, 2008; Roy, 2003). This study expands the understanding of 'power with' in Zapatista schools, by pinpointing concrete relational practices such as the use of circles and advisory boards to unsettle white supremacy culture within care work and social justice organizing settings. Addressing and dismantling white supremacy culture can prevent a social dysfunction that sustains the oppressive and carceral status quo, hindering innovative collaboration in addressing issues. More research is needed exploring how white supremacy culture is dismantled within social

justice settings, particularly since many people in these spaces often point fingers to society without looking inward to understand how they can heal themselves of systemic oppression embedded in their organizational culture.

Systems of oppression like white supremacy culture can be ideologically disrupted by instilling liberatory ethics of care and democratizing decision-making. The embodiment of care in decision-making may embrace divergence and center the most minoritized individuals, highlighting their positional expertise to promote fairer group and interrelationship dynamics. Many people with positional power hoard resources and knowledge to maintain leadership. In contrast, change agents shared concrete ways to share leadership roles, ensuring mentorship for BIPOC emerging leaders, and most importantly sharing skills to make such pathways self-sustaining.

One skill that is often undervalued in social justice movement spaces is listening with curiosity. Many organizers hear the maxim suggesting one effective strategy to build power is to meet new members 'where they are at' (Hayes & Kaba, 2023). Indeed, it might be difficult to meet people where they are when leaders might not fully know where people are, because they might follow their impulse to correct instead of connect. Based on hoarded knowledge, more experienced organizers tend to correct others instead of connect with fellow organizers through passing know-how. Unchecked knowledge hoarding becomes unchecked power hoarding. By accumulating unchecked power, more experienced organizers might fall to the western 'power over' way of subtly imposing their views. Power and privilege

produce biases that are often left uncontested with people accumulating power roles and knowledge, many of whom take on positions of unchecked leadership.

From our research, there were some concrete mechanisms by which abolitionist organizers promote deep listening to build ‘power with’. One practice is circles, since circles, when facilitated appropriately, have the potential to flatten power and allow people to check-in, nurture curiosity through active listening and thoughtful questions, and preclude interruptions or corrections from people holding positional power. Outside circles, some participants who begrudgingly assumed positions of power created intentional mechanisms to make sure their leadership was accountable to fellow care workers and organizers. Such concrete mechanisms for ethical leadership can build power within social justice movements and ensure care nutrients reach from the roots to the branched leaves, through mutually constitutive and heterarchical processes. Given the effectivity of circles to promote the redistribution of care nutrients for different practices and actions, there is a need for more research on circles as a relational embodiment of care promoting social transformation.

Transformative Praxis

I write the following putting on my hat as a budding scholar-activist and organizer. Care work and organizing work is often low-paid or volunteered-based. When people feel they are more than bodies in an action, they can see and feel their worth is asserted within organizing spaces in ways they might not experience in neoliberal capitalist heteropatriarchal white supremacist job settings, particularly

when they face oppressive circumstances. When organizers feel their efforts are recognized and celebrated, they may nurture care and joy through the intense work of striving for social transformation, replenishing their energies to continue organizing for more just living.

Change agents who co-create settings of care are more bound to move toward collective goals, slowly but surely. I have been invited to organizing groups' decision-making spaces based on my praxis. In these so-called leadership spaces, I have sometimes heard leading organizers call for more 'bodies' on the picket line or when facing police repression, yet they do not often welcome those 'bodies' in decision-making spaces. This extraction of organizing efforts that often carries risk can be dispowering and overall deshumanizing for newcomers, unintentionally reproducing neoliberal labor extraction that alienates people from the fruits of their labor (Bronfenbrenner, 1980; Heinrich, 2012). Most importantly, as our participants stressed, organizing work tends to be volunteer-based or low-paid. People engaged in organizing and care work need to feel their perspectives and expertise are celebrated and that they shape impactful outcomes in ways they would not experience in neoliberal jobs for profit. Centering care in social change work can ensure the sustainability of the work, preventing burnout. Transformative organizing spaces have the potential to be rehumanizing, contesting systemic abandonment and dehumanization. This work is challenging, yet its potential is boundless. We are continuously healing ourselves and others by organizing, co-creating cultures of care, contesting systemic violence, and sometimes feeling there is not enough time or

energy to make a significant dent in preventing carceral harm and oppressive violence. To carry on this work, we must shed the habits society has drilled into us, and to do so we must center transformative praxis in all our relations.

To promote sustainable movements, organizers who gifted their knowledge on the understory of their transformative work shared their challenges, joys, contradictions, frustrations, and overall determination to keep building and nurturing pathways toward more just conditions of co-existence. Maintaining relationships that challenge us as much as inspire us, while navigating disagreement, conflict, and harm with care is as crucial as the actions we are committed to undertake through our organizing work. Our praxis - our embodiment of our social justice values - are indeed the vital nutrients of the understory of our movements' forest.

We can cultivate relational skills to support each other in healing from systemic harm and trauma, and we must, to face the increasingly dehumanizing conditions of carceral violence and criminalization. We only have each other to collectively stand against these challenges. Having each other, our collective organizing, our praxis, and most importantly our indomitable faith based on our experience of being on the frontlines together - must be enough. I feel honored about learning, practicing, testing, and hopefullly expanding the deep knowledge shared by our participants within the understory of social change movements. I am inspired to keep learning with them alongside fellow organizers, scholar-activists, and students. We end this dissertation with a final insight from one of our participants. Kelly gifted us,

> *We need to constantly be humbling ourselves and constantly recognizing that we don't know what we don't know, and trying to make space to learn more.* [...] We need to constantly be learning about history. We need to constantly be learning about tactics. *We need to constantly be learning about 'how we can [...] do work that brings us closer, makes us stronger, and helps us build power?' Because this does not come naturally. This is a craft* [...] that people have been exercising under all kinds of conditions, forever. And so *there's a wealth of knowledge out there, and seizing upon it has to be part of the process, and we have to do it, together*.

May we continue to seize upon that knowledge and center praxis with humility, in the service of social transformation and liberation, toward co-creating fairer worlds worthy of humanity's highest ideals of care and a world we must collectively steward.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Informed Consent

UCSC Office of Research Compliance Administration

Consent to Participate in Research

UCSC Study #: HS-FY2023-140

Study Title: Enacting Change: Learning from Activists' Transformative Change Visions, Processes, and Actions

Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study by Daniel Rodriguez Ramirez and Regina Langhout from the department of Psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Before deciding whether to participate in the study, you should read this form and ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

There will be about 15 participants in this study.

Purpose

The purpose of the study is to explore how activists enact change in their organizing settings and communities they serve.

What you will do in the study?

If you decide to take part in this study, you will participate in a 1-2 hour interview with Daniel Rodriguez Ramirez. In the interview, you will be asked about your experiences of activism. After the interview, you will be asked to complete a short demographic survey asking you about your age, gender identity, and other identities meaningful to you.

As part of this project, an audio recording will be made of you during your participation through UCSC's Zoom account. You have the right to request that the recording be stopped or erased in full or in part at any time. In any use of the audio recording, you will not be identified by name. Please note below the uses of the recordings to which you are consenting.

1. The audio recording will be used by the investigators in this research study.
2. The audio recording can be used for scientific publications through de-identified transcription of interview quotes.

If you do not consent to such use of the recording, you should not participate in this study.

Time Required

Your participation will take about one to two hours.

Risks or Discomforts

There are a few potential risks to participating in this study. There is a risk that your identifiable information could be accidentally disclosed; however, the researchers are taking measures to protect your information (see confidentiality section below for more on said measures).

What benefits can be reasonably expected?

You might benefit by participating in this study by reflecting on your activism experiences in connection to their transformative potential. Furthermore, the study will benefit society by documenting how activists enact change in their organizing

settings and the communities they serve. Lessons learned from activists will be shared through academic papers and courses with students.

What happens if you change your mind about participating?

If you decide that you no longer wish to continue in this study, you can let me know. You will be told if any important new information is found during the course of this study that may affect your wanting to continue.

Confidentiality

The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Identifiable research data will be encrypted and password protected. You will not be identified in any report or publication of this study.

Because of the nature of the study information being collected, it may be possible for someone to deduce your identity. However, there will be no attempt to do so and your information will be reported in a way that will not identify you. You will not be identified in any report or publication of this study.

Your responses will be assigned a pseudonym code. The list connecting your name to this code will be kept in an encrypted and password-protected file. Only the study investigators will have access to the file. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the list linking identifiable information to the study data will be destroyed.

While the study investigators follow procedures to maintain your confidentiality, as with any internet activity, we cannot guarantee the confidentiality of interception of data sent via the Internet by any third parties.

With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded so that an accurate transcript can be made. Once the transcription is complete, the recordings will be erased. Your name will not be in the transcript or study notes.

Future Research:

We might reach out to you for future research to follow up on your experience of this study without linking your survey or interview responses to you after the research is finalized. We will ask for consent from you today before reaching out to you at a later time.

Compensation

You will receive $50 gift card for participating in this study.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?

There will be no cost to you for participating in this study.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation is completely voluntary; you are free to change your mind at any time and quit the study.

After the interview, you will be asked to fill out a short demographic survey. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer during the interview or the demographic survey. Whatever you decide will in no way penalize you or result in loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled.

You can withdraw at any time by simply leaving the interview. You are free to not respond to any question(s) you do not wish to answer. Whatever you decide will in no

way penalize you or result in loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled.

You will still receive full payment for the study.

Rights and Concerns

If you have questions about this research study, please contact Daniel Rodriguez Ramirez, Ph.D. candidate in Social Psychology at UC Santa Cruz, address 1156 High St, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, phone number (831) 205-9799, email drodri37@ucsc.edu. You may also contact the faculty member supervising this research: Regina Langhout, Professor of Psychology, address 1156 High St, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, langhout@ucsc.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of California Santa Cruz, Office of Research Compliance Administration at 831-459-1473 or orca@ucsc.edu.

Signature

Signing this document means that information in this form was provided to you and that you voluntarily agree to participate in the research described above.

____

Signature of Participant

____

Date

____

Typed/printed Name

Please sign both consent forms, keeping one for yourself.

Appendix 2: Interview Protocol and Demographic Questions

Enacting Change Interview Protocol Questions

Research Question

How are activists working toward envisioning and enacting transformative change in their organizing settings and beyond?

Pseudonym

As we covered in the informed consent, this interview will be de-identified to protect your anonymity. What pseudonym would you like us to use for you for the transcription?

Introductory Prompt

I am interested in your experiences with your activist work. I have had experiences organizing for the UCSC graduate students' wildcat strike in 2019 and in an eco-socialist party in Peru. I want to learn how activists have co-created and/or observed processes and actions that enact transformative change, inside and outside their organizing spaces. I understand transformative change as addressing the systemic causes of problems. "For example, how activists redistribute resources and labor paying attention to power differences of gender, race, income, and so on." But before we focus on your transformative change activism experiences, I'd like to know a bit about your activism. You can start from anywhere that is appropriate for you, and we'll build up together from there. Don't worry too much about what would be the "right" direction to go. Feel free to give me as much detail as you are comfortable with.

What inspired you to engage in activist work?

Possible Follow-Up Questions. How did you start your activist work?

Utopian Visions of Change

Imagine an ideal world you and other activists you know would like to live in; what would it look like? Please walk me through it.

What needs to happen to get to this "dream world?" (theory of change)

Possible Follow-Up Questions. Imagine an ideal world you and other activists you know would like to live in; what would it look like? Please walk me through it. Can you describe the world you long for/dream of?

What would this ideal world look/feel like specifically for people you work with in your organizing space? How would this ideal world look/feel like for the communities you serve? [If participant challenges the concept of an "ideal world": I would like to learn from your vision on where would you like the work you do with your organizing group to lead toward]

Envisioning Abolition/Decolonization/Liberation

How would you define the nature of your activism? What does (choose based on interview context) [abolition/liberation/decolonization] mean to you? How does your activist group work toward [abolition/decolonization/liberation]? What have you learned about [abolition/liberation/decolonial] activism that you'd like to share with other activists interested in this work?

Possible Follow-Up Questions. Picture an [abolition/liberation/decolonial] activist group co-creating within the group the world they want to see outside. What would it look/feel like to be part of it?

What lessons learned/insights/advice would you like to share with other activists working toward abolition/decolonization/liberation?

Questions about your Activist Group

I'd like to learn more about the context of the organizing space you will share today. Would you like to talk more about the organization you've been working with?

How did you get involved in this activist group? Would you like to share its name or a fake name? How long have they been involved in the issues they work on?

What tends to be the focus/goals of your organizing? What communities does your group work with?

I'd like to learn a bit more about the people in your activist group. Like, how many groups/people are regular activists in the space? What identities do you think are important to people in the group?

Possible Follow-Up Questions. How would you describe the work your activist group does? How did you join this activist group? What are some issues your group is working toward addressing?

Transformative Change Processes

I'd like to learn more about activist groups' processes/practices that might help make that dream world we long for a reality. How do you define transformative work?

What processes or practices have you found transformative in activist groups you've

been part of, both inside the organization you're a part of now, as well as other experiences you would like to share? What practices have you found the most helpful to engage people in transformative work/abolitionist activism?

Possible Follow-Up Questions. What are some ways you have seen abolition practiced in activist spaces? What are some stories you would like to share about abolitionist practices that have worked well in your activist groups?

Values, Focus, and Context Questions

What values guide your activism/your activist group?

Possible Follow-Up Questions. What values are important when deciding what activist activities you'd like to focus your time and efforts on? For example, mutual support, accountability, and sharing power in non-hierarchical ways are some important values of mine. What do you think we need to know to understand the socio-political-economic context of the community you work with? How do you/does your group deal with values that might be in conflict?

Power

How do you think about power in your organizing group?

Is there a practice of power-sharing in your group? How have you noticed activists build power with others?

Possible Follow-Up Questions. Sometimes it helps me to think about power in how spaces are organized, who makes decisions? How are people involved in setting goals and dividing work among the group?

Decision-making

How do you all make decisions in your organizing? In what ways have you seen decisions made in effective ways in your organizing? What challenges did you observe when making decisions as a group, and how did you address them?

Possible Follow-Up Questions. How do you feel about how people make decisions in your activist space? Could you walk me through how decisions are made?

Culture of Care

I have seen how when care is ensured, it helps activists do their work more sustainably across time. For example, I've also seen/experienced other activists showing care to prevent burnout, sharing rides or meals when needed, or providing childcare for activist parents to come to a meeting.

How does it feel to be cared for in activist spaces? What does it look like? What does it mean to you to think about recognizing and celebrating someone's full humanity? What are some ways you have seen activists celebrating each other in spaces you've occupied?

Possible Follow-Up Questions. What do you think about terms like, 'culture of care?' Is there a culture of care in this space?

What does it look like? How is self-care/collective care encouraged? How do those in this place enact boundaries around time, taking/giving credit? How are people's efforts celebrated?

Accountability

How does accountability work in your activist group? Would you walk me through a time that accountability was practiced in an activist group you were part of? Do you

have accountability processes in place when harm is done, or conflict happens? What accountability processes have you found effective in your activism?

Possible Follow-Up Questions. I am interested in learning how activists create processes outside punishment so people address harm and conflict and heal together, when possible. Would you like to share more about ways you've seen accountability work in activist spaces you have been in?

Transformative Change Actions

What actions have you taken/observed to push for impactful/effective/memorable transformative change in the community? Please walk me through one of those actions that meant a lot to you. What do you think helped to make those actions impactful in the community?

How were those actions aligned with your visions of change and abolition/liberation?

Possible Follow-Up Questions. How did you envision that action creating change in the community? How did the action start? What happened next? What was the outcome of the action? How did you feel being part of that action?

Challenges

What challenges have you experienced/observed in your organizing?

Final Questions

Is there something I did not ask you about that you think I should have asked you about?

What would you like people to learn about what you shared today[DARR1] ?

Is there anything you would like me to take off record? How would you like to be credited (Pseudonym)?

Debrief

I appreciate your time. I learned a lot from you and your activism. Please fill out this short survey (link here). It will ask some demographic questions and if you would be open to me reaching out to you to review our analysis. I will analyze the interviews with a group of student activists, and I'd love to hear your take on how we're analyzing the interviews. The survey will also ask you for your email address to send you a $50 gift card to appreciate your time.

Demographic Questions

Age:

Race/ethnic identity:

Gender:

What other identities are important to you?

If you feel comfortable sharing, in what city/state are you located?

How many months years have you been involved in activist work/organizing?

Can I reach out to you at a later time to gather your feedback on our analysis of the interviews?

Would you like to be sent any manuscripts from this study? If so, please note that it will be about a year before my dissertation is done and a few years before shorter papers are drafted.

Thank you so much for your participation in this research study!

Appendix 3: Familiarization Questions for Research Team

Please answer the questions below after reading/reviewing an interview transcript. Each reading response should start on its own page and be one-page long at the most. You can also copy and paste a word map or any creative way to depict your general overview of the interview, as long as you're **also** answering the questions below.

1. What about each interview is directly relevant to our research question (TC visions, practices, and actions)?

2. What was the analyzer's emotional response (emotions, thoughts, and reactions) to the interview as a whole?

   a. What is your social location and how does this relate to the social location of the speaker?

   b. What is your emotional response?

   c. What assumptions do we make in analyzing their story (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 100)?

3. Value coding (Saldaña, 2013): What are some ideologies/beliefs/attitudes shaping the participant's story. How are those ideologies/beliefs shaped by the participant's social positions of (lack of) power or analysis of power?

   d. How do participants make sense of what they are discussing (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 100)?

   e. How common sense/socially normative (or not) is their depiction of their story (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 100)?

f. What assumptions do they make in describing their world (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 100)?

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